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MARCH 1942

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STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

VOLUME 2 MARCH, 1942 NUMBER 1

STIRRING SCIENCE FICTION

STIRRING FANTASY FICTION

Cover by HANNES BOK

Interior illustrations by BOK, DOLGOV, HALL

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, EDITOR

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Published monthly by Manhattan Fiction Publications. Editorial and Executive Offices, 366 Broadway, New York, N. Y. Copyright 1942 by Manhattan Fiction Publications. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Yearly subscription $1.80. Single copies 15c. PRINTED IN U.S.A.

THE PERFECT INVASION

by S. D. Gottesman

Imperial Earth had subdued star after star in her drive for Galactic power, but when the sudden onslaught of an unheard-of enemy turned the tables, there was only Bartok and his Intelligence Wing to meet the invincible invaders!

Illustrations by Dolgov

"HEAVENS!" said Bartok mildly. "And Oh, my Lord!" His face wore a curiously complex look, as though he were half stunned with shock and otherwise doubting what he saw. Said Bartok: "They can't do this to us." He turned decidedly from the transceiver and began to pace his office. Into his personal mike he snapped: "Send in the number one houri."

Babe MacNeice entered on cue. "What," she asked, "is the matter with our overlord and preceptor?" She studied his face and dropped the smile. "Barty," she said worriedly, "what's wrong?"

"Sit down," he growled, shoving a chair at her. Looking fixedly at the ceiling he said: "I just got a report from somewhere in the neighborhood of a punky little star named Arided in Cygnus. Babe, we're being invaded. The world is being invaded."

The girl laughed briefly. "Don't be an ass," she said.

"It's true," said Bartok.

She rose and began to pace beside him. Finally she exploded: "They can't *do* this to us! They simply can't — why, *we're* the invaders; we always have been!"

Bartok looked sidewise at her. "That's the way I felt," he observed sagely. "I know what you mean. Question is, what do we do now?"

"I don't know. Let's hear the transcript from the communications outfit." Silently he turned on the rewind and replay. It said mechanically: "Office of Commander Bartok, Intelligence Wing, Fleet Command. Go ahead." That was a sort of letterhead.

Immediately there was the agitated voice of some man or other: "Barty? This is Hogan, of the Aries Hogans. I jammed this through to you — personal report. It's going to panic them if it gets out. Be very careful."

Bartok's voice: "I remember you — patrol duty for the Arided section. Give me the facts in a hurry, son."

Hogan's voice: "Ships coming at us from everywhere, it seems. A big lineship was blown to pieces before it could report. I'm the only intelligence man in the district, I guess. I don't know whose the ships are — I don't know how they work. I'm speaking from the fourth planet of Arided — polyp-like natives, oxygenous atmosphere. They're systematically bombing the cities."

Bartok's voice: "Stop beating yourself over the head, Hogan. You're crazy!"

Hogan's voice: "If that's the way you feel. They're laying a line barrage along the planet, letting it rotate under their fire. We can't get a thing into the air — it's jammed up bad. I don't know, Barty, honest I don't know —" What Hogan didn't know remained a mystery, for the transcript ended right there with a strangled wail and a deafening report.

"Oho," said Babe MacNeice in a long exhalation. "He wasn't kidding."

Bartok was at the phone: "Get me Fitzjames," he said. "Yes — the all-highest Admiral of the Fleet, the slave-minded ol' windjammer in person." In a rapid aside to Babe he snapped: "I can't handle this. I'll leave it to the navy — it's their baby."

Again at the phone. "Admiral? Shoot some patrollers out to Cygnus Arided. Don't be surprised if they don't come back. Invasion, admiral. I wouldn't kid you." He hung up sharply.

"That," he said absent-mindedly, "is that. Whether their tactics are capable of defensive war remains to be seen. There is room for doubt."

THE PATROLLERS did not come back. However, one managed to keep unbroken contact with the flag-ship until it was blown out of the ether, and the story it told was plenty nasty. No description of the invading ships was given except what the patroller got over in the customary strangled


dolgov

wail just before it broke off sending. It could be assumed that they weren't reaction-type vessels. They moved faster than light, which meant knowledge of the unified field theory's most abstract implication. They had, without a doubt, bombed or rayed out of existence, the populations of about three score planets. This meant that either their science was something infinitely beyond the Terrestrial grasp, so far beyond it that it could not be called classified knowledge at all but must, necessarily, be lumped together as a divine attribute, or their ships were *big*.

The Fleet had successfully colonized a great deal of space and in the course of wiping out unsuitable native populations and encouraging others, battling moderately advanced peoples and races, suppressing the mutinies inevitable in a large, loose organization, and smacking down the romantic imbeciles who had a few tons of hard cash to throw away on what was considered a career of piracy, had developed an extraordinary amount of offensive technique and armament.

Their ships were marvelous things. They were so big that they were built at special drydocks. When they took to the ether from these they would never touch land again until they were scrapped. There simply wasn't anything firm enough to bear their weight. You could explore a line-ship like a city; wander through its halls for a year and never cross the same point. When the big guns were fired they generally tore a hole in space; when the gunshells exploded they smashed asteroids to powder.

But the Fleet had nothing to show that could match the achievement of the as-yet nameless invaders, who had rayed the life out of a major planet as it revolved beneath them. According to the reports the job had been done in the course of the planet's day. One ship could not send a ray powerful enough to do that; possibly twenty might, but they would inevitably foul one another if they got within a million miles nearness. And a million miles clearance between each ship would mean that they'd separately be about eight million miles from the planet. And from that distance you can't work rays or bombs. From that distance you can just barely think unpleasantly of the planet, which doesn't do either good or harm.

From all accounts and from the terrified deductions these invaders packed solid jack, and plenty of it.

It wasn't very long before the invaders were in complete control of the sector they had first arrived at, and had won that control without a real fight or even once tipping their hands as to what they had and what they could do if they were hard-pressed.

There had begun a general exodus back to Earth; one would have thought that there was already a major space-war on from the scrambling and confusion. Any planet that boasted a graving-dock for minor ships of the line was thrice overloaded with a charge of human beings, for the mere presence of dismantled destroyers was a guarantee of temporary security. After three weeks of the senseless scrambling the Admiral was forced to declare that there would be no more admissions to planets and whole systems having vital bearing on the welfare of the Fleet. He quietly began a program of evacuation so that if there should be a raid on a Fleet base there would be no deaths save those in the service. Things were confused; public temper was generally timid. The prospect of a defensive had scared the living daylights out of them. It was utterly unthinkable that Earth, the great invader, should get a taste of her own medicine.

Where they came from nobody knew, where they were going nobody dared to say. But it was perfectly obvious that the All Earth and Colonies culture stood in their way, and that they were bound to stamp them flat. The invaders must have been awfully foul creatures in their psychological make-up to do what they did, for they gave no hint of their moves, which is the dirtiest trick that you can play on anyone. They simply moved up slowly and surely from their obscure base on the outermost planets of the Earth culture.

And they kept moving. There were no survivors; that was the most appalling part of their technique. Everybody who could run, ran. Everybody who was left, died. Communication was cut off simply and efficiently by scrambling techniques which must have meant the expenditure of trillions of kilowatts per hour. Or did the invaders have some unsuspected source of energy? Nobody knew; that was the hell of it.

BARTOK was good and ready to blow his brains out. It was his specialty, as commander of the Intelligence Wing, to relay information as to the whereabouts and plans of whatever enemy might be at hand. It was his misfortune that this enemy simply refused to let him know.

He was brilliant, brilliant as a flawless diamond, and just as hard. Give the man a problem in smuggling or in colonial subjugation and he'd have it cracked in jig-time. But this — ! It was impossible.

Babe MacNeice, assistant extraordinary, consoled him with: "Barty, you've done all you can — all anybody can to stop them. It isn't your fault that they've got more on the ball than we have or could hope to have." A philosophical shrug of the shoulders. "It's a question of making room for our mysterious friends. They may not even strike at Earth. They may even turn back."

"They may even," said Bartok sourly, "turn into packages of

Rinso. But don't count on it. Babe, this is a *spot.*" There were dark circles under his eyes big enough to make barrels with.

"Then how about a joy-ride?" asked the girl. She looked absent-mindedly at her fingernails.

Bartok was studying her closely. "Yeah," he said. "How about it?" He dropped into a chair. "Shoot," he said. "I know that mysterious air of yours."

In cloyingly sweet tones she replied: "Barty, darling, don't be an old silly. Aintcha gonna take itsy-bittsy Babesy for a ride?"

He stiffened as if he had been shot. "Sure," he said. "Why didn't you say it that way before?" They shot up to the roof in Bartok's private elevator and got into the commander's very private plane. As they took off he growled: "All right — spill it."

"I'm sorry I had to be sickening before you got the idea through your skull that I wanted absolute and complete privacy," she said, again her own brisk self. "But I have a notion."

"She has a notion," said Bartok expectantly.

"Take it easy. Only a hunch — still — where do you suppose there's enough room for a complete invasion-culture to develop without once coming into contact with the Earth culture till now, when it's at its height?"

"Space is plenty big, Babe. There's room for a thousand colonial systems as big as ours that we'd never even know of."

"Okay. That establishes the very first postulate. Those things are real. Therefore one doesn't have to be a psychic to investigate them. I am not psychic; ergo I can and will investigate them — in person." The girl avoided Bartok's eyes, and rattled on: "May be that my logic doesn't hold water, but I think I can handle the job. You wouldn't send me out there, and I know you're on the verge of saying that you'll go yourself.

"Well, you'll do no such damned thing, because they need you here as a relay center and someone whose statements to the public have some degree of authenticity. You're the only one in the whole blasted navy that's worth a whoop in hell, and our benighted citizens know that as well as that yellow-bellied Admiral of the Fleet Fitzjames. Now that it's settled that you can't be spared we'll get around to the reasons why I, rather than any other agent from the wing, should be assigned to this job."

"We can dispense with that," said Bartok wearily. "The fact is that next to me you're the best worker we have. So go, my child, with the blessings of this old hand."

"Cut the kidding," she snapped. "I mean business. Instead of the blessing of that old hand I'd like some advice from that old head."

"You can have my biography," said Bartok. " 'Twenty Years a Spy, or, The Tale of a Voyeur Who Made Good'." He took from his pocket a small package. "This," he said, "I have been carrying for the moment when you'd pop your kind proposition. It's lightly sealed. In a moment of supreme danger you are to open it and be guided accordingly."

"Thanks," she said grimly. "Whatever it is, I believe I'll need it."

CHAPTER II.

BARTOK had never thought he could forget Babe, but that was just what he did in the next two months. It was the healthiest thing to do after she had hopped off in the big, fast one-seater that had been built especially for her jaunt. And Bartok was busy. Bartok was so busy that sometimes he thought he must be mad and living in a world of hallucinations on the reasonable grounds that nobody could be as overworked as he was and survive it.

Quietly and persistantly the invaders kept moving in, establishing bases as far as anyone could see. The personnel of the Intelligence Wing was dispersed throughout the colonial system to restore order and prevent hampering of the Fleet as it was making ready to attack.

It was, of course, somewhat problematical as to just when that attack would come. The yellow-bellied Admiral Fitzjames was cowering in his flagship behind miles of steel and chewing his nails with sheer terror. For the ships he sent out — cruiser, destroyer, patroller, interceptor or miles-long battlewagon of the line — simply didn't come back. If they got within sighting distance of the invaders they never survived to tell of it. And the ether was still jammed thick as apparently unlimited power could make it. Or was their power unlimited? Nobody knew.

It was bidding fair to be the most successful invasion of all times; just as the successful exploration is the one without adventure to mark its high points so this invasion was completely unchronicled by those invaded. They simply didn't know.

The galactic state of jitters is not easy to describe, but that's what it was. Tap a person on the shoulder and he'd turn with a shriek, fainting dead away. Suicide was on the upcurve, psychoses were increasing, messiahs popped up like mushrooms to lead the saved to glory and life everlasting. Bartok's men arrested these as fast as they could and even formed a few rival cults on the premise that a few million fanatic followers would be not at all bad things to have about, thus capitalizing on the stressful times.

Production and distribution of commodities bade fair to break down; it was Bartok's men who saved them. Acting on an old-time tradition Intelligence men stood with drawn guns at the doors of factories, offering to blow the guts out of the man who stopped working.

The commander, on the fly between the stars of the colonial system, hadn't time to change his socks, let alone receive re-

ports, notions and nostrums from cranks. Therefore it was natural that he refused to see the sailor from the flagship of the fleet who said he had something awfully important to tell him, but that it wasn't official. It would have been better if Bartok had listened, for the sailor was going to tell him what the Admiral had said to his secretary while passing through the sailor's corridor. It had been: "By God, Hackenshaw, if something doesn't happen I sail for parts unknown and that beastly Bartok can fight his own war!" But the sailor never saw Bartok, in spite of deserting from the flagship and commandeering a lifeboat to make the trek from Venus to Algol. Instead he was shot for desertion when they picked him up in a math parlor where he was spending his last hours of life in the popular diversion of the day, capping formulas.

Hence it came as a staggering blow to Bartok to learn that the Fleet — all the line-ships, that is — had simply taken off into space after raiding all the cities near at hand for women. They were headed, when he heard the news, for a minor star-cluster near the edge of the universe, and in the opposite direction of that from which the invaders were coming.

"Akh!" screamed Bartok, when the news was broken to him. "The—the—the—" Words failed him. For hours afterwards he was in a daze. When he snapped out of it his first words were: "How about their commissariat?"

A subaltern tactfully informed him that they had made no provisions of any sort for food and supplies. A couple of hours after Bartok was heard to observe: "They're going to starve to death." Which was the exact truth.

When the Fleet was eliminated from the scheme of things Bartok found himself in more or less complete command of the colonial system. What vestiges of an executive committee there had been on Earth were quite shrivelled away. Most of the committee had died of fright when they learned that the Fleet had left them high and dry.

The Intelligence Wing took unto itself all authority of life and death, officially, at last. They had been shooting leaders for quite a while, but it hadn't been with sanction and consent from above. The Wing expanded legally to cover with its charter all those tenders, lighters and gravingships which had been left behind by the back-bone of the Fleet. It made them the most powerful unit then in the colonial system, with fire-power to match any that sporadic rebellions might bring up.

Meanwhile the invaders progressed amazingly, almost forgotten as the cause of the system-wide crisis. They would have been totally lost from the public eye in the confusion had not reports come in about once a week that there was no further communication with such-and-such a sector. A few retired sailors moved forward pins on their star-maps and wondered how they managed it without once showing their hand.

And Bartok, who had once wished at least six times a day that he might have a free hand to remake the colonial system — "— and obstacles be damned!" — was wondering if a really sound case could be made out against his willfully inhibiting— by means of an overdose of cyanide — his metabolic process.

IT BECAME apparent that after four months of horrid confusion and blood-letting that things were quieting down, partly due to the able handling of the situation by the Intelligence Wing, which managed to keep the lid on practically everywhere and save the system from a complete premature smash-up, mostly because the populance had got used to the idea of being invaded, and successfully.

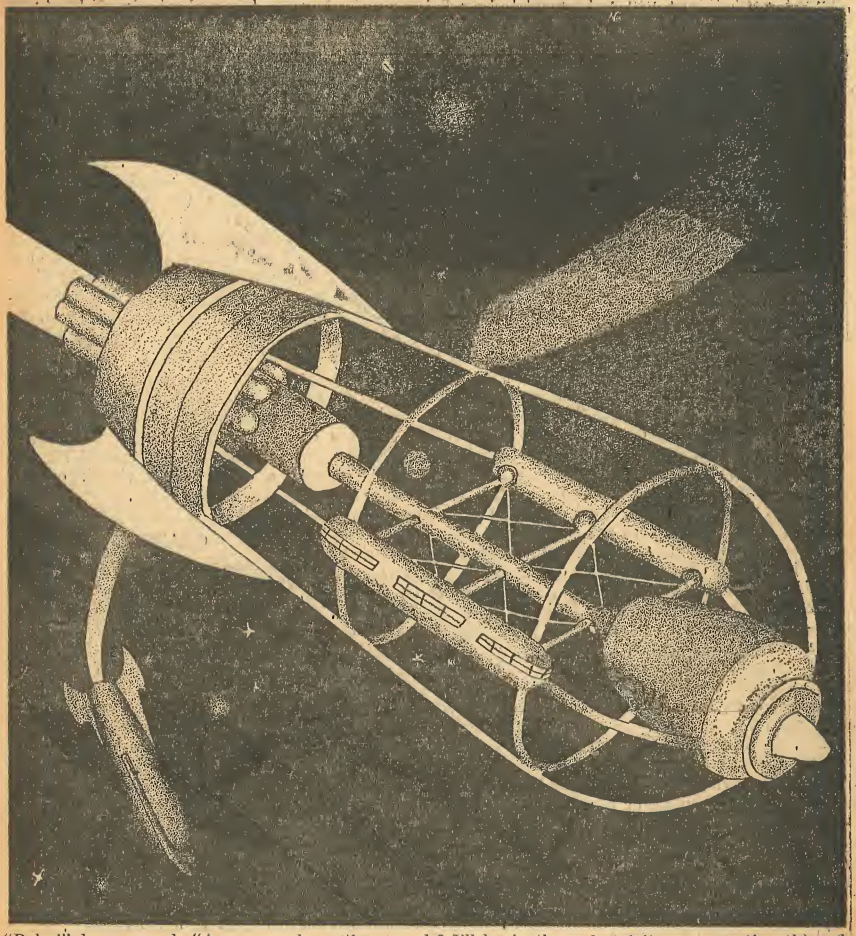
The ordinary round of living began again, with perhaps a little more feverish gaiety in the math parlors and a little less solemn conviction in the houses of worship. When Systemic Coordinator Bartok (the title had been hung on him while his back was turned; he still swore that he was nothing more than the Wing Commander acting under emergency powers) was able to take a vacation the last of the internal trouble was officially over and done with. It had been ugly, certainly, but there had been episodes in the system's history even less attractive, as when the docks broke down during the days of the old Nine Planet Federation and there had actually been people starving to death and homeless.

It had occurred to Bartok as he lounged in his birthday suit with the other convalescents at Venus Springs, at the South Pole, that it would be touching and entirely appropriate to the spirit of the service to pay tribute to that deceased but magnificent female, Babe MacNeice.

He had arranged in his mind's eye a procession of notables to lay wreaths on a simple block of tungsten. He had just begun to work out the details of the speech he would make when there came a faint blatting noise from his wrist, the only part of him that was dressed, and that purely for utility. From the tiny transceiver came: "Barty, this is Central in New Metropole. The recorder in your private office has just begun to squawk. Who's it hooked up to?"

Bartok thought, furrowed his brow like a plowed field. "MacNeice," he said at last. "She's the only one hooked up to G7. I'm coming right up." In about the time it took him to dress he had called a plane, one of the very special racer models that he had fallen into using during the quick-moving past months when a second clipped was a score of lives saved.

In two hours flat he was slamming his office door behind him and jiggling the dials of the transceiver set on G7. No answer.



"Babe!" he snapped. "Are you in? Speak up!" No answer.

His fingers jittery, he set the machine for rewind and replay. The letterhead spoke its piece tinnily, then the voice of Babe MacNeice snapped out briskly over the wires:

"Hello, Barty. This'll get to you sooner or later if you survive. It'd be too much to hope that I'd have you on the wire. Things must be pretty whacky down there — eh? I'll begin the report in good order.

"Took off — hell, you saw me. Went toward Arided without any trouble. Was hailed by a lot of freighters and sundry obsolete crates that had no business being in the ether. They seemed to think that I was going the wrong way. Few billion off Arided transceiving got muddy; then I slapped right into a zone where there simply wasn't any getting electricity or magnetism through at all.

"I sighted something in the deeps where there wouldn't be any Earthly ships around, so I did a quick fade. That's greekish for dodging and twisting so fast that I caught up with my own light-waves. After a few minutes of that I streaked straight behind a star. They probably hadn't seen anything move so fast, so they weren't ready.

Damned good things you put racing motors into my scow — otherwise you wouldn't be hearing this. For that matter, maybe you aren't. I'll get on.

"Those of my instruments that weren't chasing their tails because of the freak fields floating around there told me that I was being followed twist for twist. They had a tracer of some kind on me, because they didn't know where I was — just where I was going. Which isn't good. I stayed perfectly quiet, waiting for them to show up so I could shoot a torpedo at them. Show up they did. They had a funny craft, Barty — damned funny.

"It was open to space — just a skeleton ship. Not very big, either. Twenty times my length, about. Couldn't get any details, but there was something awfully peculiar about it. Anyway, I fired my torpedo, which was a mistake. It was a magnetic, and since the fields were thrown out of kilter it buzzed around, skinned past me once, and lost itself in space. Then they got gay and began throwing things at me — odd design, all of them. There was a skeleton-shell, like their ship, that packed an awful wallop when it exploded on time a thousand to my starboard. And they have rays.

"Yes, honest-to-God rays, like you read about in the story-books! Not having the experience of an Aarn Munroe or the ray-screens of a Richard Seaton, also like you read about in the story-books, I just ran like a scared rabbit. And then it occurred to me to open that mysterious package you handed me. I did so. What did I find? Another mysterious package inside it, with the note: 'So you think this is a tough spot? Think it over again before opening this.'

"It was a dirty trick, Barty, but it worked. I gave 'em the old one-two. 'One' being a cloud of smoke thick enough to confuse any tracer, 'two' being the space-mines you so thoughtfully shoved onto my scow at the last moment over my protests that I didn't want to be a flying powder-keg.

"I scattered the mines like bird-shot through the fog, and later had the intense satisfaction of seeing the ship that was on my tail explode in several pieces. That must make the first blood for our side in this war.

"I figure that blood-drawing saved my life for the moment, because exactly three hours later I was taken in tow by five more of their ships, same pattern and size. And that was where your little joke began to wear thin, because I opened the second box and found inside it another box and another note, which said: 'And this too shall pass away. Don't open this one unless the going's *really* bad. Cheer up; the worst is yet to come.' Who the hell do you think you are — Elbert Hubbard?

"As I was saying, they must have taken me prisoner to find out how I had managed to knock off one of their boys. I couldn't see a thing except the skeletons of the ships and buggy creatures crawling around on the beams. Disgusting sensation, *really*.

"They landed me on one of Arided's planets, considerately one with an atmosphere. I got out in cold blood. My God! Barty, you never saw such a place! I don't know what it was like before; the usual colony-planet, I suppose, with labor-barracks and factories and semi-detached homes. But what I saw! Towers, Barty — all towers, spiring into the heavens like mountain peaks! I'll swear that most of them went way above the atmosphere line. And there was machinery, machinery, machinery — the ground was solid with it, heaving pistons, reaction jets like volcanoes. You don't know what I'm talking about, Barty. You have to see it. I'm sneaking in these last words under very trying circumstances — undergoing what the tinny brutes call purification. I'm going to see the master after being kept waiting for months, and whatever he decides to do with me goes on this world. They —"

The replay broke off. That was all. There weren't any sound-effects, not even the customary strangled wail, and glad enough Bartok was for that. Apparently she had been caught using the transceiver, and it had been smashed. Bartok straightened himself out tiredly. He'd kept the world fairly well up while the invasion was going on; there were others capable to take over now that the real crisis was past and there was nothing to do but wait for the taking-over by whatever the incredibly soulless creatures were that could ray all the life of a planet out of existence without a qualm.

He was getting old anyway. Time to make room for younger men. He might have a fling now as any time at applied mortality. He was going to build himself a cruiser and streak out to Arided and Babe.

CHAPTER III.

HIS EXPERIENCE with the invaders was substantially the same as Babe's, though he reasoned — and correctly — that they would adjust for detection of a mine-field layed in a smoke-screen. Therefore he trotted out something so antiquated in concept that the invaders would surely have forgotten it, if ever they had known the device.

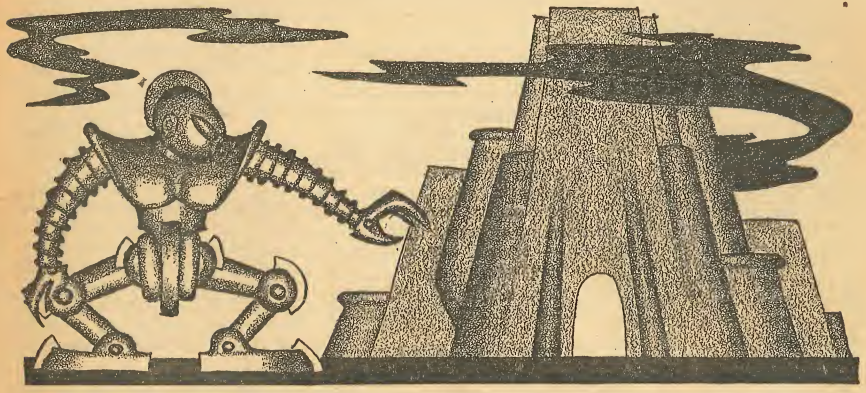
In the neighborhood of the first invasion port, the star in Cygnus, he encountered the phenomena Babe had described — utterly scrambled fields. Experimentally he held an electro-magnet to a bit of steel. First there was no reaction, then the steel slid to the magnet. Then it hurled away from it like a bullet!

Throughout his experiments he hadn't failed to keep a lookout. The chime that signalled foreign bodies rang just once, and he trotted out his modernized version of the ancient Greek fire, fore-runner of explosives. He squirted the blazing stuff through his rear jets in a wide-

open pattern, obscuring the sight of him more effectively than any fog-cloud could have done. When his simpler instruments told him that the ship tailing him was quite lost in the Greek fire he sprayed out a flock of tiny, powerfully explosive pellets.

There was one blast and it was all over; the tailing ship was dispersed through space, and whatever had been its crew was lost beyond repair.

Having effected this, Bartok set his motors to idling in the direction of the invasion star and lit a cigarette, waiting in almost perfect calm to be detected and taken in tow.



He did not have long to wait; there were half a dozen ships on him in twenty minutes. They clamped onto him what he realized must be the perfected tractor ray, so long celebrated in song and story and never yet seen on any spaceway till now.

As the tractors dragged him through space towards Arided he inspected very closely the ships that were applying it. They were six in number; as Babe had said they were remarkable for the fact that they were quite open, being no more than a power-unit around which was built a framework containing emplacements for weapons of all sorts and conditions. There were cat-walks as well, up and down which scuttled nasty things about the size and very nearly the shape of men.

Bartok was baffled by the metallic sheen of the things when it hit him that they were robots. "Damned clever," he mused. "*Damned* clever indeed. They don't need air, they don't need a commissariat; all they need is orders and oil. I wish we'd thought up that gag a few centuries ago!"

They landed him skillfully and easily on the fourth planet. As Bartok looked about he realized slowly that Babe hadn't been under any hallucinations when she'd sworn that the engineering works that had been run up were the most remarkable things in the unknown universe. There were towers everywhere, great patches of concrete for landing and servicing ships; long lines of them hanging in the air waiting for room. Not one square inch of ground space except narrow cat-walks could be seen free of any mechanism. What was not transmission gears was solar engine; what was not solar engine was unimaginably complex calculators clicking and buzzing away as robots stalked among them to tear off results and deliver them to the nearest building.

Bartok got out of his ship; immediately a gang of robots sprang to attention after the fashion of a guard of honor. Bartok had never seen robots before; there were enough hands to do the work of the colonial system and the social problems that would have been raised caused any experimentation with robots to be frowned on by the executive committee. And where was the executive committee today? God only knew. It was a very sure bet that if any of it was left this residue would be mopped up by the despised and strictly forbidden mechanical men. Somebody had beaten the colonial system to the punch. But who could it be?

Commander Bartok nearly swooned when a robot-in-command came up to him and said in perfect, though toneless English: "Pray excuse this temporary detention, Wing Commander. I can assure you that it shall be terminated in a brief while."

THE BRIEF while extended itself into three days before they would tell him what was going on. During that time he had the run of a delightful apartment which lacked only books and magazines for his comfort and relaxation. Apparently to substitute for them the robot-in-chief, or whoever was in charge, sent in robots whose

specialty was brilliant conversation and repartee.

On the third day there entered the usual loquacious metal man. "Your bed is rumpled," he greeted Bartok. "I presume your feelings are the same at this opposite situation?"

"Opposite?" said Bartok, knowing from past experiences that the creature would explain some elaborately buried pun or double meaning in his greeting, which it did. There was some complex word-play with "smoothing the way" and "weighing the smooth", likewise a series of faintly ribald jests concerning the metal men themselves. Bartok, bored though he was, could not but admire the intensive manner in which they went about working a subject, whether the unified field theory or the technique of the double-take. He hadn't the ghost of a chance of holding up his own end of the conversation with this copper-plated specialist in the whimsical and amusing. He realized glumly that he wasn't specialized. He could crack a joke that would be a fairly good joke, but not half as funny or well-timed as the robot conversationalists; he could plan an attack, but not half as deadly as the robot fighters.

"Man," said Bartok," is on the way out."

"Weigh out the consequences," snapped the creature promptly, "and you'll find your remark substantially correct. Man too is correct — or, to put it differently, wrecked at the core."

"Where did you learn English?" asked Bartok feebly. He still didn't know. And on the answer to that question hung, he felt, a great deal.

But before the robot could make some horrible pun about "Where" and "wear out" one of the larger metal men entered, with a grave salutation to Bartok.

"I," it said, "am math-minder 817. Come with me, please. Subtend angularly this surd improperly vectorial." Piercing through the mathematical metaphors Bartok realized that he was to say good-bye to the conversationalist, because he was going on a long journey.

"It's been nice meeting you," he said helplessly.

"Thanks," said the conversationalist. "And it's been nice metalling *you*." Another pun, worked in double reverse — surely a fitting note upon which to terminate the strange intellectual companionship of the cheerfully intent killer Bartok and the grimly humorous time-passer, chat-minder 32.

In the corridor the math-minder volunteered: "Bartok, you unfortunate particle, you're going to investigate some teleology."

"That being the science of first causes," brooked the Commander. "Do you mean that at last I'm getting to see your chief?"

"Not chief. First cause, I think you said. Accelerate through this aperture." The robot's paw gently shoved him through a very heavy metal door. Bartok found himself face-to-face with a very young man.

"Hello kid," he said. "What brings you here? Captured?"

"Sort of," admitted the boy. "You're Mr. Bartok, aren't you?"

"Only in jest. Everybody calls me Barty." He was trying to put this young man at his ease; presumably he was destined for the same ordeal as he. Prestige of the genus homo demanded that he keep a stiff upper lip.

"Okay — Barty. I suppose you know why you're here?" The Commander stared in amazement. The boy had mounted a flight of steps to a throne-like affair that took up most of one wall. "I suppose you know why you're here?"

"Wha-a-at? Son, who the hell are *you*?"

The boy sagged down into the seat. "Unwilling master," he said, "of the most powerful army in the universe."

"BARTY!" screamed someone.

"Babe!" Bartok screamed right back, catching the girl in mid-air as she hurled herself into his arms. After a few preliminaries he demanded, "Now what goes on here?"

"I'll introduce you," said Babe MacNeice. "Barty, this is Peter Allistair, from Capella. He's a bit young — twenty — but he's all right. It's not his fault, any of it."

"How can that be?" demanded the Commander. "If you're their boss? Do you know what your ships are doing?"

The boy sagged deeper into the chair, a haunted look on his face. "I sure do," he said. "And I'd give my right arm to stop it. But they won't believe me. I made the things, but they won't believe me when I say I want them to stop their colonization."

"You and who else?" asked Bartok. "You and who else made these billion or so robots?"

"I did," said the boy defiantly. "At least I did indirectly. You know there's a law against robot-experimentation — or was. Well, I couldn't let well enough alone. I had an idea about robots, so I came to Arided, which was the least populated section that I could find, and I built the damned thing."

"Built *what*?"

"A robot whose function was to manufacture robots. And that was the fatal error. You know how resolute those things are in carrying out their jobs." Bartok, thinking of three days of solid punning, nodded absently. "Well, this thing would have killed me if I'd tried to stop it. It said it had a divine mission to perform. So it built another flock of robot-manufacturing robots, which did the same.

"Then they began to branch out and make ordinary fetchers, mathematical workers and a few fighters. I got interested and designed a ship from the math workers' figures. And a stray remark I dropped to one of the protcans — those are the robot-

makers — about fanaticism gave them the idea of turning out fighters with souls bonded over to me. I swear I didn't mean it that way! But look at the result.

"Every week or so one of the foreman robots brings me a list of the suns that are now under my imperial domination. And I can't explain to them because they aren't trouble-shooters specialized to straighten out a mess like this. And the proteans can't make a trouble-shooter because they aren't the originals, who simply manufactured for its own sake. The originals are all worn out and scrapped, and the ones that are turning out robots now are also fanatics with the idea of conquest for my greater glory.

"It's a chain of events that's been twisted around and tied to its tail. If you can find a way to stop it let me know."

Entered a grim-faced fetching-foreman robot. "Worshipful master," it intoned, "your dominion is extended this week over twenty new suns. Accept this list, your children beseech." He handed to Allistair a sheet of names.

The boy let it fall to the floor. "Listen," he said passionately to the robot. "I don't want any more sheets like this. I don't want to conquer any suns or planets. I want the proteans to stop making robots. And above all I want you damned hunks of tin to stop calling me worshipful master! I'm not worshipful and I'm not anybody's master."

The foreman said methodically: "Worshipful master, despite your folly we are loyal and shall make you lord of all things that are. It is for your own good that we act. Do not forget the day when you said to the great protean 27: 'Fanaticism may be a good thing. If you machines had more of it things'd be a lot easier for me. If I wanted I could be master of the universe with you machines, given that touch of lunatic bravery.' " The foreman stumped out of the room.

"Where they get those ideas I don't know!" shrilled Allistair. "I haven't the faintest idea of what their machinery's like. My God, what I set in motion when I built protean 1!"

"The trouble is," said Bartok broodingly, "that you have all the fire-power you need and no control whatsoever over it. And because of this lack of control you are even now waging the most successful invasion of all time. I don't blame you — I know the spot you're in. You say you don't know a thing about these late-model robots?"

"Not a thing," almost sobbed the young man. "Not a thing. About twenty robot generations have gone by since I built protean 1, and they've been evolving like wildfire. A math robot thinks up a new law of electromagnetics, takes it to a physics robot who applies it and takes it to a protean, who incorporates it into the next series of machines. That's the way it perpetuates itself. They invented death-rays, tractor rays — I don't know what-all!"

"You shouldn't have said fanaticism, son," worried Bartok. "That was the *one* concept that couldn't have been cancelled out by another suggestion. Because a full-fledged fanatic brooks no obstruction whatsoever to achieve his aim. Not even such a trifling detail as the fact that policy, orders and authority are opposed to that aim."

"And," said Babe, "these robots are the most full-fledged anythings you could hope to see. Did you meet one of their full-fledged humorists, Barty?" She shuddered. "Back on Earth we'd lynch a comedian who never let you catch a breath between gags."

"What'm I going to do?" asked the young man simply. "I can't have this on my conscience. I'll blow my brains out."

"Babe," said Bartok. "That package I gave you — still got it?"

"Yes, you old home-spun philosopher." She produced the package. "How many more to go in this Chinese ring trick?"

"Only one. Open it up." Curiously she tore off the seals and read from the neatly-printed card that was in the last of the boxes: " 'If you've given up hope be ready to die. If you haven't, try misdirection.' " She stared at the Commander. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"The purpose of the little boxes was simply to jog your imagination in tight spots. There isn't any cure-all formula except the thing you carry in your skull. The human brain is a marvelous mechanism . . . " He turned abruptly on Allistair. "Take me to see one of your proteans, son."

CHAPTER IV.

"MAKE tracks, Babe!" the Commander yelled, sprinting for the little cruiser in which he had arrived at Arided. He flung himself into the cabin a second after the girl and a split-second before the craft roared into the air.

"We are now," said Bartok, sprawled comfortably along the floor, "going to see the first and, I hope, the last real space-battle of its kind, fought with rays, disintegrators, ray-screens, inertia-less drive and all the lunatic creations that crack-brained authors have been devising for the past few centuries. It is fitting and proper that this war should be fought, because no real lives are going to be lost and it will inevitably end in a stasis, both sides having wiped each other out."

"But can he put up a real fight?" asked the girl worriedly.

"Remember what I said about the human brain, Babe? It's bigger and better than any thinking-machinery, however elaborate. It's nature's way, which is often best. Nature's way was to smash the protean and perform a simple operation that substituted Allistair's brain for its impulse-mechanism."

"What happens then?" she asked. "Not that I question that he ought to die in a good cause.

He was a nice kid, but it was a flagrant piece of criminal negligence, monkeying with robots."

"Agreed. So he makes retribution in the best way he can. Those damned protean machines control about half a billion robots apiece after they manufacture them." He shuddered briefly as he remembered what the protean had looked like. Bartok had expected a neat, man-sized robot: instead it had been a million cubic feet of solid machinery.

The Commander yawned. "So, having taken over this protean's control factors with his own brain he is in a position at last to direct the creatures he made. Of course he'll use his robots to fight the other robots. Here comes the first contact."

Far to the rear of the speedy craft there was a titanic flaring of lights and colors as two fighting ships met. Unimaginable forces roared from the searchlight-shaped projectors, impinged spectacularly on thinly glowing ray-screens. The ray screens went down after about three minutes of brilliant resistance and the ship vanished in a puff of vapor.

"Ugh! Disintegrators!" said the girl. "So they really had them!"

"Why not? To the mechanical mind everything is possible except common-sense. Instead of negotiating with Allistair they'll be confident of their superiority. And, fire for fire, they are stronger. Also their tactics are perfect. But young Allistair's tactics are bound to be faulty, which means that his ships will show up where they couldn't possibly be and blow whole protean units to hell and gone. His fire-control has the edge on them in that it's unpredictable."

Babe's eyes were astern, on the colossal battles going on; on the forces being released that made a Fleet flagship's biggest big guns seem feeble. "This part of space," she said, "will never be the same. It'll be like trying to plot a course inside the orbit of Mercury. I suggest that you proclaim that fact to the world."

Bartok grinned. "More speed," he said. "I wouldn't want to be caught in one of their fire-balls. See that?" He pointed excitedly at a moving fleck of light that had separated itself from a monster flying fort just off the ground. "That thing's as big as Ceres — and it's explosive. More speed, Babe, if you value my hide."

"I do," she said shortly. "The colonial system, or what's left of it, is going to need a firm hand to tide over the stresses and strains of this robot's war."

"It shouldn't last for more than a few years," said Bartok. "When a force like that gets split they haven't got time for anything else. And don't fret about the colonial system. There's a lot left of it yet, and it's right in the palm of my hand."

Babe MacNeice looked hard at the Commander. "If any other man," she said, "told me that I'd make it a point to blow up this ship before we touched Earth. But I think you can be trusted."

"Algol ahead," said Bartok, pointing to a star-disk off the bow. "The outposts of empire, where they're chewing their nails about the strange noises and flashes to be seen and heard over the communications systems. We'll have to evacuate them nearer Alpha Centauri or thereabouts. Can't chance one of those fireballs hitting a planet of the system!"

He reached for a recorder and began barking orders into the mouthpiece. Before the cylinder was half grooved he had — verbally — evacuated three galactic sectors, reorganized the Intelligence Wing, scrapped the now-obsolete graving docks where no battlewagon would ever dock again, converted the lighters and tenders of the Fleet into freight ships for emergency use, and begun to draft a new constitution for the All Earth and Colonies Federation.

"That," said Babe happily, "is the way I like to hear you talk."

Algol loomed ahead.

FANTASY AND THE WAR

Just after the editors had completed this issue of Stirring Science Stories, the news came of the sudden assault upon our nation. In the days that followed, America gave thought to the new emergency. So, likewise, did the clubs of science-fiction readers for shortly we received the following communication from John B. Michel, Director of the famous Futurian Society. We pass it on to you: —

"The Futurian Society of New York declares its unswerving sympathy and loyalty to the great struggle being carried on by four-fifths of the population of the Earth headed by the alliance of the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China against the barbarian thrust of the Nazi-Fascist-Japanese Axis. It makes this declaration in the firm conviction that the further progress of science and civilization upon which the visions and dreams of science-fiction are mainly based is dependent entirely upon an Allied victory. The shape of the Future is being decided on the field of battle of the Present. Science-fiction readers, writers and enthusiasts have no other possible choice but to do all in their power to aid and speed the triumph of civilization over fascism. To this end, the Futurian Society appeals to all science-fiction clubs, publications and readers to issue similar declarations and to do all in their power to help the United States to absolute victory."

The editors and publishers of this and the other magazines of the Manhattan Fiction group are completely in agreement. Fantasy can play a good part by helping men relax and keeping alive the right to dream. Stirring Science Stories will do its share to that end.

THE GIANT

by Basil Wells

Rolf Cameron went into the future to find himself a hated monster in a world of ant-like men. And safety lay millions of miles away. . . .

Illustrations by Bok

ROLF Cameron lapped four grimy slim fingers thoughtfully across his stubbly chin. His thumb gently massaged the slightly outsize member roofing his upper lip. Absent-mindedly he brushed back the lock of unruly dark hair that curtained his slitted right eye.

"No reason," he muttered, "why it shouldn't work. Same hook-up, same series exactly.

"Sent two pencils and a mouse through the thing an hour ago. Must be a bug somewhere in it. . . "

His eyes probed deep into the snarled vitals of two unlovely jumbles of tubes, condensers, metal plates, and dull bluish plastic. Ten feet of emptiness separated the twin transparent domes that were the heart of the weird machines.

On the dull bluish base of one of the domes— the mattercast— — a long yellow pencil, one end sprouting a bulging red rubber eraser, lay unchanged. The other receiving dome was empty.

The stubborn problem confronting Rolf was that of transmitting, via a radio beam, the basic atoms of matter and reforming them into their original unharmed state.

The modern newsheet transmitter that snaps your freshly printed copy of the *Ganymede Herald* from your receiver slot daily is essentially the same invention as that conceived by Rolf Cameron back there in the Twentieth Century . . . .However the transmission of matter has nothing to do with this story, so . . .

"She's okay," Rolf scowled, shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe a little more juice will do the business."

As he spoke he drove home the knife-switches that cut in the power and gingerly adjusted the control knobs. Slowly the power built up until a muted hum of steady power beat out from the banks of tubes.

But the pencil lay unchanged and yellow beneath a weird flaming bath of greenish light.

Rolf stepped forward toward the other machine — the receiver — and for the moment was squarely in the path of the transmission beam. His fists were clenched and his deep-set gray eyes blazed angrily as he leaned over the impotent machine.

Then it happened!

A sudden blast of flame ripped through the soldered patchwork of the mattercast as a circuit shorted; a mighty surge of unleashed force sucked him into its vortex, and then blackness, inexorable chill emptiness, swallowed his senses.

VELVETY greensward was beneath Rolf's prone body when he groaned and rolled over, centuries later it seemed. Three inches from his left eye there glistened the bright golden cap that gripped the big red eraser and the painted yellow wood of a pencil equally. And scattered about were other scraps of shattered epuipment.

Unsteadily he climbed to his feet, eyes shuttering rapidly as they took in the unfamiliar outlines of his surroundings. He shook his heavy, dully throbbing head. His jaw dropped and he thoughtfully tugged at his ear as he saw the village sprawling beyond the low hedge.

The houses were doll houses, less than four feet in height despite the steepness of their thatched roofs. Unpainted, roughly constructed shacks they were and the crooked paths that wound between them were powdery rills of dust. So near was he to the little town — a hundred yards or less — that he could see its inhabitants, manlike in every respect save size, moving busily about their works.

A foot tall were most of them. They wore a single, loose-fitting coverall garment of drab brown or a discouraged yellow, and a silly little black helmet balanced precariously atop each miniature skull. Nowhere did the young creatures play together— instead they somberly weeded the geometrical rows of growing things beside their elders. For all the world like a colony of ants thought Rolf.

Rolf's startled eyes quested along the horizon — the familiar rugged outline of the distant hills was there, unchanged. But something was wrong with his immediate surroundings. A crazy six inch wall of stone wandered in a drunken circle about the barren patch of earth that outlined with green the shape of his extended body. And groves of fruit and shade-trees —stunted five foot growths that should have arched high overhead — surrounded him.

He was a giant in this strange, yet familiar, environment.

Then he saw a little creature, one of the manlike insect things, regarding him timidly from the concealing shade of a Lilliputian

orange grove.

"Hello," he called softly.

For a brief second the little creature cowered further back into the shadows, his broad ugly features frozen with terror into an ashen gargoyle mask. Then he hesitantly inched forward up to the encircling stone wall.

He was a squat misshapen little monster, his huge fuzz-rimmed head perching like some monster spider atop his warped frail body. Like some imagined man of the Future thought Rolf for there was the flame of intelligence in this creature's mismatched eyes.

"I am Jek," said the little man in clipped, oddly accented English. "Who are you, Moster, and what do you here in the Forbidden Field?"

"Moster?" queried Rolf. "Oh I get you — monster! I am no monster. My name is Rolf Cameron. About five minutes ago I was experimenting with an invention of mine when, pffft . . . and here I am."

"You," the little man's blue eye widened and his other squinted, "are Rof the Sleeper? You are he who slept in the Forbidden Field these many years in a bed of lightning?

"Yes," he answered himself, "the fire is gone. Rof is gone. You are Rof the Sleeper."

"I could be," reluctantly admitted Rolf, his jaw tightening with a click. "How long have I — slept on my bed of lightning?"

"My people have lost count of time," Jek said sadly. "Long years before the Great Change you slept here. This I know from the fables of my people. It was death to touch the fire that surrounded you. So this wall was built about you."

Rolf chewed at his upper lip for a moment, staring off into empty blue space as he digested this startling news. Apparently the shorting circuit had somehow resulted in a mighty surge of time-annihilating power that carried him far forward into the future.

Tell me, Jek," he requested, "why are you so tiny. Why are the trees, the village — even the grass — so tiny?"

"I DO not know all," admitted Jek solemnly. "My people have destroyed so many writings of the ancient days. Only a few of us, atavistic humans like myself, desire knowledge. Few of us can read. Few of us are curious or even try to think. We work, we eat, we sleep. If they see me away from my work I will be killed. It is the law.

"If they see you they will kill you. All Mosters must be killed. But have no fear. I will not kill you. I am not like the others."

Rolf smiled, grimly amused at the little man's words.

"Before the Great Change," Jek went on, "all men were giants. Too many men crowded Earth. Even in the oceans they lived on artificial islands. There were many wars to capture land already overcrowded. Men and women starved.

"So the scientist reduced the size of men. By radiations, glandular treatment or some other means. The records are not clear and many of the books are destroyed. But when men were a foot tall Earth was big enough for all of them."

"I rather imagine," murmured Rolf making rough mental calculations. "The area would be increased by 62 — thirty-six times as many square miles as before."

"The Great Change destroyed us," droned on Jek. "Sons of miners remained miners. The sons of farmers remained farmers. The power to reason is gone. Our brains are too small."

"Right," agreed Rolf. "And Jek, unless I'm greatly mistaken that same thing has happened before on Earth. The Age of Reptiles must have had some species with great intelligence. They are gone. Perhaps an ant civilization once dominated this planet — giants that lived in great city domes. The ants' orderly system of life and their galleried domes of earth and sand are pitiful survivals of their one-time civilization — wrecked by a desire for more room to live!"

Jek scratched his fuzzy skull in bewilderment.

At that moment a shrill shout of hatred sent Rolf's eyes flashing toward the village. Advancing through the low groves and across the mossy green meadows came perhaps a hundred of the little people, miniature spears gripped in their hands and glinting toy swords of hammered metal at their side.

Jek groaned. "You must escape," he shouted. "They will kill you and eat your flesh. You are a Moster. I will go with you. They will kill me too."

"Come on then," cried Rolf swinging Jek up to a perch on his shoulder. "Where do we go from here?"

Jek's arm thrust before Rolf's eyes, indicating the northern range of hills and the canyons beyond — the wild country of the upper Colorado.

"Mosters live there," he said simply.

A shower of little spears flashed about them as Rolf began to run. Two of them pierced the loose cloth of Rolf's baggy pants leg, where he found them dangling later in the day, while another grazed his side.

Then they were beyond effective range of the thrown weapons and Rolf sent a half-dozen heavy rocks crashing back into their advancing ranks. Jek tugged at his ear and pointed again toward the distant hills.

"Soon," he shrieked, "the horsemen will come. They can run like the swift rabbits. They will follow us. When we sleep they will plunge spears into our eyes. Thus do they kill the Mosters."

"Jek," demanded Rolf, "what are these monsters you talk about, the ones we go to find?"

"Giants," said Jek eagerly. "Men like you. Men who would not submit to the Great Change."

ROLF had lost all count of the days. For many weeks they had roamed the desolate tree-clad canyons of Northern Arizona and Southwestern Utah searching for men like himself. They found weedy cultivated fields in hidden box canyons and the clean-picked bones of men and women about the ashes of dead fires beside the empty walls of nearby cabins.

The Four Corners were as empty of human beings as in those ancient days when only Navajos ventured into that forbidding rocky wasteland.

Often they went hungry and water did not touch their lips for days. Rolf's beard was matted and long and his body was covered with ill-cured hides against the biting cold of the canyon nights. He carried a stout bow now and a butcher knife of hammered iron that he had found in one of the empty log huts.

So at last they stumbled quite by accident upon the entrance to a deep canyon, walled about with an unbroken line of sheer red and yellow cliffs. The rusty overhanging rim-rock seemed to close in overhead until but a slender ribbon of blue split through their twin walls to light the tree-lined stream bed. The crumbling eyeholes of an ancient cliff-dwelling stared down at them from the red ruin of the southern cliff.

The smell of snow was in the air. The bitter Utah winter was at hand and the protected shelter of the hidden valley was welcome. Welcome too was the sight of several warm log cabins and a central stone building where, in its deep cellar, they found plentiful stores of dried foods and grain.

"Here we stop," announced Rolf.

"It is good," agreed Jek. "Better a spear in the eye than the cold."

"If we cannot live in the cold," laughed Rolf," neither can your people."

"That is right," nodded Jek emphatically. "We are safe here."

But that night the sound of light footsteps brought Rolf upright from his blankets. Closer to the crude bed of poles and laced rawhide thongs did they come. His muscles tensed; his fists knotted hard, and suddenly he launched himself on the intruder.

He felt soft flesh and the rough texture of coarse cloth beneath him. A startled moan of utter terror and pain whooshed out of the intruder's lungs at the moment of impact. This was no little man! It must be a Moster!

"Jek!" he shouted, "throw wood on the fire. I've caught a . . . uggh!"

Something heavy and uncompromisingly hard crashed down upon his skull and he rolled dazedly away from this second unseen assailant. Numbly he fought upward from the uneven hewed planks of the floor until his widespread feet were beneath him.

Jek threw a handful of dry twigs on the hot coals in the great fireplace. Flame flared up and in the indistinct half-light Rolf could see two shadows that moved swiftly away toward the cabin's inner room. Steep wooden steps led down from that central room into the narrow cellar. They must have entered there; the outer doors were double-barred and thick.

He was upon the escaping pair in a single mighty bound; spun

them around with a hand on either shoulder, and sent a hard-driven fist thudding into the jaw of the Moster on his left. The blow jolted hot lightning back along his arm to the elbow.

Then he was raining a flurry of slashing short blows on the other. Slowly he beat the intruder back against the wall. A soft cry of helpless despair checked his onslaught; the light blazed high from the fire, and he saw before him the swaying blood-bruised form of a woman!

"Please don't hit me again," she begged. "We did not know that you were a man. We thought the Little People had all gone so we came back through the tunnel tonight. This is our home you see."

"Lord I'm — I'm so sorry," stammered Rolf. "I didn't know you were a woman or . . . Rolf Cameron is the name."

The girl dropped into a rough chair before the fireplace, her breath a broken panting thing. Rolf hurried to light the tallow candles in their ugly rock candlesticks. Then he found a seat on the logs piled beside the fireplace's great maw.

"My name is Janet Larsen," she broke a long moment of silence. "We are the survivors of a colony of scientists who hid here almost two centuries ago when the Great Change destroyed Earth's civilization. Most of that time we have busied ourselves with the rebuilding and repair of a wrecked spaceship that crashed a few miles away.

"But that is ended," she sighed. "All the men are dead. We cannot escape to the stars now. Mankind is doomed."

"Glmmp," groaned a voice from behind them and another girl emerged from the shadows. "I'm the human punching bag. Call me Jean. Boy, do you ever pack a wallop!"

"Jean!" admonished her sister, "why must you use those awful archaic expressions? That, that — slang I think you call it.

"She's been reading some of the ancient books of the Middle Ages," Janet explained to Rolf, "early Twentieth Century literature."

"Oh," smiled Rolf. "Then we'll feel right at home together. Sit down, babe. Where'd you learn to swing sucha wicked sap?"

"Geeze," gasped Jean breathlessly, plumping herself down beside Rolf, "you do know the lingo!"

"HERE we are stranded on Earth," Janet was saying several days later as they sat close together on a sun-warmed rock ledge overlooking the autumn-hued little hollow where the cabins squatted placidly. "If father and the others had only been with Jean and I in the cavern when the Little People attacked them we would be halfway to Ganymede by now. The *Vulcan* would not be an earth-bound hulk of metal. But they were all pulled down — and eaten."

"Why the Jovian moons?" Rolf wanted to know.

"Well," Janet answered slowly, "because a few years before the Great Change two Martian spaceships loaded with colonists from the three planets Venus, Earth and Mars, set out for the moons of Jupiter. They were never heard from again but we feel certain that some of them must have landed safely. Venus and Mars are of course overrun by the Little People so we knew that only on some distant world we might find human beings like ourselves."

"Why not go anyway?" Rolf questioned. "I would like to see Earth from empty space before I die. I have always dreamed of spaceflight and of exploring some new world. Eventually the runts will find us and jab out our eyes; so why not take a chance on blasting off for Ganymede or Io? Better to die in space than in these forsaken canyons."

"You are right!" cried Janet impulsively springing to her feet and facing the man. Her eyes burned with a prophetic flame. "We'll blast off this very night. The labor of two centuries shall not be wasted. And we will reach our goal. I know it."

"It is a small target to shoot for," Rolf told her soberly, "but with the food and supplies already stored in the *Vulcan* we can live for fifty years in space. We should find a habitable sphere in that time."

"Hiyuh, Big Boy," rang out a cheery greeting from the trail above the engrossed pair. "Trying to play Romeo to Janet? No use playing up to her, Rolf. Her heart is pure asbestos. She thinks necking is a kin to hanging."

"Listen, brat," Janet cried, her face flushing beautifully, "do you ever think of anything but wisecracks? Beat it!"

"Begorra!" squealed Jean. "You've got her talking human, Rolfy. Ain't love the nuts?"

Rolf grinned back at the irrepressible little tomboy taunting her older sister. He could not decide which girl was the most charming — the blonde, tousle-headed, tanned Jean in her mannish breeches and sweater, or the dark-haired, simply dressed Janet, so charming and thoughtful. Both girls were attractive, intelligent young women — almost beautiful. He was half in love with both of them.

"We're heading out into space in a few hours, kid," he told Jean.

"I'm no kid!" Jean exploded, tears bursting from her eyes suddenly as she raced madly away down the narrow trail toward the cabins.

"Weeell," gasped Janet, laughter bubbling deep down in her throat, "you *do* have a strange effect on the opposite sex, Rolf."

From the bushes nearby there sounded the patter of little feet and the tiny figure of Jek ran t o w a r d them. Rolf's hand dropped to the worn handle of the revolver now belted around his waist. Jek was panting and his eyes were glassy with strain.

"Have found us," he choked out. "Little People come thick

as ants to kill. Many, many of them. Must hide in cave inside big boat. Hurry."

"Good fellow," said Rolf clapping the little man's narrow back so hard that Jek swallowed twice and sat down abruptly.

"That settles it — we take off at once," Rolf told the white-faced girl at his side. "Last time you escaped their notice because they believed that all of you were wiped out. This time they will hunt us down one by one unless we leave the canyons forever."

Janet nodded her head mutely.

"Hurry, Rof," Jek cried out tugging at the leg of the man. "They are near. Run."

"I see them," Janet whispered tensely. Rolf spun half-about.

A moving mass of black dots, little men mounted on miniature shaggy horses, was descending a flinty ridge of stone a scant two hundred yards further up the canyon. Rolf sent six bullets booming up at them and for a moment they reined in, confusion milling them into a whirlpool of bobbing heads and legs. Then he grasped the girl's hand; swung Jek up to his shoulder perch, and raced down the rocky path to the shelter of the cabins.

An instant later the pygmy horsemen charged down upon their heels. Swiftly the gap narrowed between the two groups but Rolf and the girl reached the cabins a good fifty strides ahead of their prisoners.

Jean welcomed them with a taut grin but the little repeating rifle in her slim tanned fingers kept snapping. And with every spaced shot a tiny rider rolled from his mount.

Rolf jerked down several shotguns and rifles from their pegs

along the wall and sprang to the door at Jean's side. Janet found her father's old revolver and loaded it with trembling unaccustomed fingers. The shotgun bellowed twice and a great gap opened in the charging horde of little men.

Rolf snatched up a rifle from the little pile beside him and sent a barrage of bullets after those devastating shotgun blasts. The mounted men galloped away then into the screening shelter of the trees and brush at the edge of the clearing.

"Quick!" Rolf shouted. "Down the tunnel before they circle the cabins. I'll hold off the runts for a little while and join you."

"Okay, skipper," said Jean saluting him in a very unmilitary manner by blowing him a kiss. "And give 'em hell!"

"Be careful, Rolf," cried Janet anxiously as she followed Jean and Jek into the inner room.

"Sure," grinned Rolf, "Be with you directly . . . I hope."

DOWN the narrow trail and through the weedy clearing about the cabins swarmed the mounted Little People and their brothers on foot. Hairy little men clad in the furry pelts of beasts and armed with clubs moved forward beside trimly garbed pygmies armed with swords, metal shields and spears. Hundreds of them gathered for the kill, and behind them pressed yet other hundreds.

Rolf emptied three more of the shotguns, reloaded them and fired again. A third time he emptied all his weapons into those clustering ranks; dropped the last gun, and raced for the cellar and the tunnel opening out from it.

Along a narrow, rough-timbered drift he ran for a hundred feet and emerged in the shelter of a heap of rocks and clustering brush. Less than fifty feet distant, at the base of a weathered yellow cliff, opened the hidden entrance to the cavern where the ancient rebuilt spaceship pointed its blunt nose skyward. He leaped forward out into the open stretch of rocky ground that lay between. Fifteen racing strides and he would be safe within the shelter of the great cavern. But from the rocks; from the very ground underfoot it seemed, there sprang screeching little spearmen, and behind them massed ranks of swordsmen and the hairy wielders of clubs.

In an instant his body was bleeding from a score of wounds and wicked little spears porcupined his heavy coat and trousers. Then he was ploughing through their frail ranks bellowing savagely with rage and pain. One arm he held before his eyes to ward off the showering spears but in his other hand he gripped the legs of two of the little men. With this improvised human club he battered a road open before him.

The unhurried crack, crack of Jean's rifle from the cavern's plank-doored entrance took a mounting toll of the swarming little monsters, and Janet fired her revolver blindly into their close-packed bodies, her eyes dry and hot with terrible rage. Rolf reached the door and stumbled headlong inside.

Jek swung the little two-handed axe that Rolf had fashioned for him, as the first of the little men poured into the cavern, and split a pygmy skull neatly. His axe swung up again.

The two girls slammed the heavy door shut against the crowding ranks of the enemy and barred it. A crushed tiny hand protruded from the crack where door met frame. Janet shuddered and her nostrils whitened. Then she turned resolutely upon the half-dozen rat-like warriors trapped inside. She swung her revolver by the barrel.

Grim work it was, and bloody, with the crunch of tiny skulls beneath the weight of their clubbed weapons and Jek's axe. In a moment it was over. When Rolf climbed weakly to his feet there were no Little People, save Jek, in the rocky passage. None that lived, that is.

After that it was the work of but a few minutes to close and seal the outer and inner locks of the space-pitted, patched old cruiser. Rolf and the two girls hurried to the control room blister. Jek they strapped into a space hammock much too large for him and then found hammocks for themselves. Carefully they checked every strap and spring of each canoe-like suspended bed designed to ease the sudden pressure of several times normal gravity.

"Here goes," shouted Rolf as his fingers snapped over the primary firing lever.

A mighty surge of power, a great hand that pressed chokingly against their chests, bore them back, until their hammocks flattened against the padded walls behind each hammock cubicle. Blackness snapped a sudden curtain across their brains.

The thin rock shell left above the old *Vulcan's* nose parted like rotten tissue as the great cigar of metal blasted skyward. And the Little People cowered on their bellies, trembling. . . .

Many stories would their meager brains concoct of the strange rock that stole away the last of the Giants, the Mosters, and fell up into the sky.

FAR below drifted the silvery disc of Earth. The blackness of space was about them and the bright sparks of a myriad of stars blazed in hitherto undreamed-of beauty. Somewhere out there the four major moons of Jupiter beckoned them on.

Rolf's fingers tightened on the two girls peering from the observation port beside him. They faced the unknown together.

Together, adrift in a battered old wreck searching for a rounded chunk of rock somewhere out beyond.

BLIND FLIGHT

by Millard Verne Gordon

When the conquest of space is accomplished, do not suppose that it will be like navigating a celestial sea. Sailors see the sea but space-fliers may never see the stars!

EDWARD SEDGWICK took a last glimpse at the steel sphere he was to occupy for the next few days, glanced once again at the blue sky, shook hands with the head of the Commission on Space Flight, climbed up the metal ladder and crawled into the circular orifice just under the sphere's equator. As he progressed on hands and knees down the narrow tubular passage, the hissings and clicks of the thick metal plug being fastened hermetically behind him, brought to his attention that he was now entirely cut off from the world of man.

The huge ball, towards whose exact center he so laboriously crawled, was about one hundred feet in diameter and perfectly spherical. Though the outer surface was honeycombed with vents and sensitive cells, there was no window or viewing porte of any description. Sedgwick was being interred alive in the middle of this globe of metal, yet, as the clicks of other metal partitions fell into place behind him, he was not afraid in the slightest.

He had wondered whether he would feel fear when the day for the real test came. Sometimes he had awakened at night with a cold sweat and a ghastly dream of burial alive in an iron coffin. Yet now, as he neared the little bubble in the core, he realized in a detached objective sort of way that he was quite calm and collected. He knew that was the factor which had made him desirable for this job, nonetheless each time he realized it, it came as a sort of surprise.

Now he climbed down into the control bubble and the last disc swung shut, sealing off the passage. He seated himself in the heavily cushioned arm-chair that swung so marvelously on universal pivots. He could swing this chair around by merely shifting his body so that it could face any conceivable part of the perfectly globoid interior of his chamber. No matter to the fact that if he tried it now he might be hanging upside down. Very soon things like up and down would cease to exist save as unfunctioning markings on two or three of the innumerable dials and meters that studded the control bubble's interior. He could reach out with a hand and touch anything in it, so small was it, yet he was not stifled or crowded. He had switched on the air and conditioning mechanism as soon as he entered and he knew that the living conditions in the tiny room would remain habitable and comfortable indefinitely.

Fool-proof automatic controls were in operation. The air was constantly being cleansed and replaced. The temperature of the chamber would never vary by more than two degrees no matter what the outside conditions were.

Sedgwick strapped himself in and swiveled around to face the planet-level controls. From his central position he was like the base of a will that drives a body from its hidden place in the skull-encircled brain. His eyes drifted easily over the readings with the skill that came of months' intensive training. Outside temperature on top of the sphere was 85, on the bottom 64. It was a hot day and the sun shining on the metal did that, he knew. He knew exactly which way he now faced and exactly what atmospheric conditions were. He glanced at the time and saw that he should start. He reached over and turned a switch. Power was on now and the lights on the sphere's exterior glowed. That was a signal to the crowd outside to clear away.

He allowed five minutes and then pressed eight buttons on the rocket panel and threw the master control. There was a slight jar and he felt his seat taking up the added pressure of his body. His acceleration meter was now in operation and he watched carefully as his speed mounted. The sphere was plunging upwards into the sky, his controls told him, the rocket vents on the earth-side of the globe blasting away. He set more of them into operation and his velocity increased sharply. As he watched his speed mount, he never let his eyes lose track of the other salient recorders. It was an old practise and he was not worried. His acceleration was steady, rockets firing in order, fuel flow proper, surface temperature changing rapidly, air-pressure dropping swiftly. Tubes recorded no overheating.

A glance at the photosensitive meters for the surface cells revealed that it was now almost fully dark outside. Things were in perfect order.

For a half hour the great sphere continued its acceleration upwards. When finally the velocity dial registered what he wanted the pilot cut the rockets entirely. Far in the recess of the globe, automatic switches cut out the feed to each of the many rocket jets set near the surface and the explosive liquid fuel ceased to feed into the semi-atomic blasters. The sphere

floated free. It was no longer in the Earth's atmosphere but in the realm of interplanetary space.

SEDGWICK noted that gravity had ceased now that the ship was at rest. He knew that his velocity, even with the rockets off, would continue unabated. The sphere had passed the escape-speed for Terra. It was in free space, the dials registered no pressure on the hull. To one side a dial noted a steady flow of heat, that would be the sun. On another side registered a dim flow of light. That would be the earth-glow. The rest was darkness.

But the man was strapped in his seat and there was nothing loose in the bubble and, outside of the curious feeling in his stomach and head and the indisputable evidence of the omniscent meters, there was no evidence that the sphere was free of planetary gravity, free in the empty void between the planets.

From his photo-cells, the pilot knew what things were like outside. He flicked another button and cameras in the surface took a record of the scene, a record which would be much more accurate than anything he could see with the naked eye.

Sedgwick wondered whether man ever would see space with the bare eye. He glanced at another part of his controls and reflected that it was unlikely. Cosmic rays were bombarding the craft with incredible fury, unhampered by a hundred miles of atmosphere which alone kept life from being burned out of existence on earth. Here, he knew that only several shells of thick lead and steel, fifty feet of metal machinery in any direction, concentrations of chemicals and fuel, air supplies, food and swarms of wire, kept the cosmic rays from reaching him and torturing the life from his flesh.

Protoplasm is a very delicate chemical compound, the thought suddenly occurred to Sedgwick, and it must be kept carefully sealed from raw force. It survived only within certain very narrow limits of temperature and under certain very restricted conditions of gases. Here he glanced again at the conditioning charts but all was well. Those limited conditions that kept his metal fish-bowl fit for the fish were working to perfection. Metal and rubber, plastics and glass, electricity and atoms, all lifeless and unimaginative, were harnessed here to keeping the little bit of water and carbon mush that was Edward Sedgwick liquescent. The subjective term was "alive."

Still, this little bit of mush, this complex and unstable compound that was man, had built for itself the means wherewith it could master the antagonistic cosmos. Here was man, here within this little bubble of air in the midst of this greater bubble of metal, bravely dashing around in the domain hitherto exclusively reserved for planets and comets and suns. Mankind had usurped the privileges of stars and Sedgwick was the first to exercise this conquest.

He reset his meters. His chair swivelled slightly. Rapidly his hands pressed a half dozen buttons. Acceleration started again. An integrator clicked out a set of numbers in its little glass face. They were set up on the controls and put to work.

He watched the glass panels as the maneuver went into effect. The ship accelerated again. The direction was different. The sun below him. The sphere was heading away from the sun. The earth too was behind. Ahead was Mars. Not directly ahead but the sphere and the planet were both travelling towards the same point in space.

Sedgwick was not going all the way to Mars. He was going only part way there. Cameras would record further data and the globe would return to earth. Maybe it would go all the way to the red planet some day but this was only a test.

For two days the sphere continued on its course. Acceleration of the rockets had been cut off after about four hours. At that time the metal ball was travelling at an unbelievable speed. Sedgwick could have made Mars in a week at that rate but he knew his limitations and he had his orders. He had been given this post because of his level-headed judgement, he did not betray that trust.

During those forty - eight hours, Sedgwick had little to do besides check his controls. He was fed regularly by an automatic panel which every four hours thrust pellets of food-concentrate at him and the nozzle of a water valve. Also he catnapped when he felt tired. Automatic alarms would have awakened him if there had been need.

At one time there had been a momentary flickering of gravitation dials. There was nothing to be done for what was detected was a sizable body about fifty thousand miles away. The sizable body being undoubtedly an asteroid of perhaps ten miles diameter. No concern.

Only one other thing broke the monotony. One of a cluster of photosensitive cells on the sphere's skin went black. It was smashed. A meteor obviously, a tiny pellet of rock flying through space. Sedgwick wondered why more had not hit him; he had expected more trouble than that. Then he realized that after all space was really terribly terribly empty and besides it was possible a number of others had hit the surface where it would not be detected nor indeed make any difference.

THE SPHERE was brought to a halt at the proper time and hung in space slowly revolving on its own axis. It was now about six million miles from Mars and there it would wait for ten hours or so until the red planet had been thoroughly photographed by the

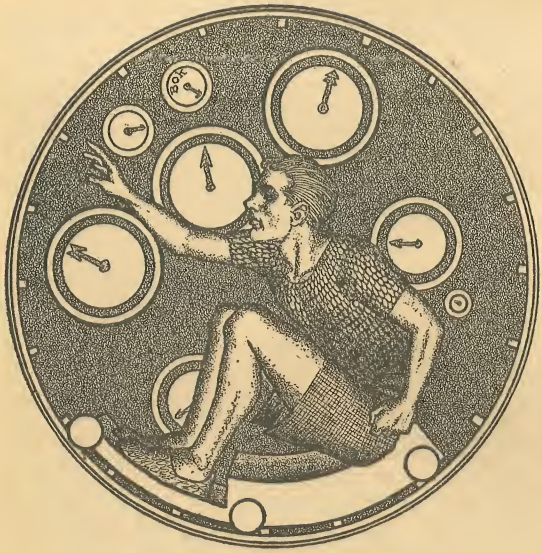
Illustrations by Bok

telescopic cameras and recorded in other ways by other instruments.

The man could detect where it was by the glow registering on the surface cell clusters. He could tell where it was by the gravitational directives functioning on the panels. He could tell exactly its mass and speed, his own speed, the Earth's, the sun's and every other major body's. He knew what their orbits were and what was to be done to bring the ship back to Earth.

He laughed to himself briefly when the thought struck him that he had now been in space almost three days and yet had not set eyes on the stars. It struck him that that was probably the longest such period away from a sight of the stars that he had ever been in his life. And yet, actually, he was surrounded by them!

As he was setting the dials to



bring the ship back in an Earth-bound orbit, another gravitational recorder started functioning. A body about ten thousand miles away, a small body. Presumably another wandering asteroid. They should be frequent here even though this was inside the orbit of Mars. Many asteroids crossed that orbit even though the majority stayed between Mars and Jupiter.

Casually Sedgwick computed the orbit of the new body, saw that it would pass well beyond him and paid it no further attention. It was not until after rockets were accelerating the sphere back towards the Earth that he noticed that his original calculation on the new asteroidal body was in error. Apparently the mass would pass uncommonly close to where the sphere was. Perturbed over the original mistake, which should have been impossible, he speeded up the rocket a bit and shifted the globe slightly. It should be sufficient to put distance between the asteroid and the ball.

Later he noticed that mistake had again occurred. The asteroid was still heading for an intersection with his sphere. Either the tiny planet had changed its orbit, which was impossible, or somehow the wires and mechanisms of the outside sensitives were deranged. That was possible and it was also dreadfully serious. A meteor perhaps? It might have buried itself into something and created a short circuit somewhere. The dials showed no such thing though and it was unlikely that any single meteor could have fooled all the dials.

Again he shifted the sphere's course and this time he watched the dials registering the asteroid. Sure enough the gravitational sensitives altered slowly and surely to bring the foreign body's shift into a new orbit that would keep it on an intersection with the sphere.

Then Sedgwick noticed something else. That the speed of the asteroid had altered, had accelerated. If the fixed velocity of the little astral wanderer had been the same, it would not have mattered much where it headed. The velocity of the globe was so much greater and was quite capable of outrunning any natural body. But the speed of this strange body had altered; it had speeded up and it had not lost anything of the original distance between them. In fact the man now realized that it was accelerating even more than his sphere and was steadily closing the gap!

This was no asteroid. He was sure of that now. Coldly sure of it and he wondered at himself for his own coolness. Then with a start he recognized his own emotion. It was that calmness that settled over him with every stress and emergency. This then was a serious crisis.

What was this body? He dared not think and yet he knew he must. There was one conclusion and one only. No comet, no asteroid, no meteor could change its orbit. No lifeless body could speed itself up and so diabolically and consistently keep its path in space so that it would overhaul and meet up with the sphere no matter what shift the latter made. This was, this could only be, an artificially created mass, an intelligently directed body, another space-travelling vehicle for an intelligent race!

But from where? From Earth never. From Mars then? Maybe. It was a likely possibility. He had approached Mars. He had hung for a while in space surveying it. Could it be that Mars was protected? That Mars was patrolled? That something was coming to investigate him?

Sedgwick had no mind to allow that. He knew several things. One, that he had no means of communicating with another space-sphere. Two, that his first duty was to bring back his sphere safe and intact with all its records unimpaired. Three, that if alien hands or alien machines tried to pry into his craft, it would almost certainly accomplish ruin and his death.

Therefore Sedgwick r a n. Rapidly he activated rockets as fast as the increasing velocity

and acceleration would permit. And as his speed increased, he kept refiguring his orbits so as to cut his path to Earth shorter.

AS THE sphere ran, so did the pursuer. When one put on a burst of speed, so did the other. Steadily the distance between the two bodies grew less. Hours went by and the sphere was blasting along at minimum possible acceleration. Now the alien body was close, was within a mile or so and still gaining.

Sedgwick was able to determine more things about the enigma. His registers were delicate enough to detect things they could not while it was far away. The other thing was several times larger than the globe, it was egg-shaped, and it had a high reflecting scale such as polished metal would have.

It was obvious that the pursuer must be gotten rid of within the next hour or all would be lost anyway. At this speed of travel, he would have to start decelerating soon or else the sphere would overshoot the Earth and never return. There was no further dodging or outrunning possible. Now he would have to fight it.

The ship had guns. Sedgwick had laughed at the Commission when they had installed them. He had said that they could never expect to use them and now he knew that whoever it was on the Commision that had ordered them had more foresight than seemed.

The guns were six in number, two at the poles and four along the equator. They did not project from the surface. Only the pit of their muzzles showed and they were covered with sliding metal discs when not in use. They were naval ordinance, loaded by automatic feeds, fired by the rocket fuel and hurling shells filled with terrifically powerful explosives.

The recoil of a gun firing was taken by automatic discharge of a blank shot from the gun on the opposite side of the sphere. In this way the course of the globe was not altered by the recoil.

Sedgwick shifted the sphere slightly until one of his polar guns was aimed at the pursuer. Then he waited. This shot had to be effective. He dared not miss or blunder.

Steadily the sphere roared on towards Earth and steadily the strange pursuer followed, closer and closer. It narrowed the distance from a mile to a half mile. Sedgwick was impelled to fire but restrained himself. Through his head floated the old Bunker Hill injunction about waiting for the whites of their eyes. This shot had to be good. He knew nothing of the armament of the mysterious follower, therefore his first shot would have to be the deciding one.

Now he watched the dials closely. The giant egg was a few hundred yards away. His finger rested on the firing button. For a second it hesitated and then pressed down.

He never noticed the shock for it was counterbalanced. But he saw the meter of the gun rapidly check off shots as shells slid one after another into the breach and were blasted off point-blank at the strange mass. One, two, three, four, five. . . .

Then suddenly the sphere received a blow as if a giant bat had swung and connected with it. The pilot's chair swung wildly about on its gymbals and all the instruments vibrated madly. When it had steadied again, Sedgwick saw that the sphere was hurtling away from the scene of the shooting. The dials registered the terrific explosion that must have taken place. The concussion had hurled the globe off its course.

Where there had been a gravitational force manifesting close by, now there was none. The pursuer was no more. It must have blown to smithereens when the shells struck it.

Sedgwick rapidly recalculated his course and shot on homewards towards the Earth. A number of photo-cells were blank on the explosion side, several rocket tubes were out of commission and other things connected with that side were awry. The sphere, however, was entirely under control and quite navigable.

Landing blind was not so hard as he had only to follow the radio beam. The radio had stopped functioning as soon as he had left the Earth as had been predicted and it had started again when the sphere successfully eased to within five miles of the surface. The great ball slid gently on its rockets into the field of its origin and came to rest.

When Sedgwick had crawled out through the exit tube and had shaken himself free from the stiffness of his muscles and the hands of the small crowd, he realized that it was night and the stars were shining down. That was what held his attention the longest, that and the great gobs of raw black *flesh* that had smeared over the sphere's side when the unseen pursuer exploded.

Read the Life Story of

BORIS KARLOFF

in the March Issue of

MOVIE DETECTIVE

OUT FEBRUARY FIFTH

THE DAY HAS COME

by Walter Kubilius

Centuries after the last war had ended, the factories of death still functioned, forgotten in the wilderness, awaiting the call to strike a blow against a foe long dead.

Illustration by Dolgov

THERE was a whirling flash of trees past the window. One wing struck a crag and with a mighty crash the plane erased itself against the mountainside.

Some hours passed before Weaver awoke with a throbbing pain in his arm. A cut shoulder was caked with frozen blood and the first thing he heard was the icy whistle of the cold wind. He staggered to his feet but fell back, fainting, upon a drift of snow and would have been lost were it not for Millet's strong arm.

"Weaver!" Millet shouted above the roaring wind. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," Weaver said feebly. "Go to the others."

Millet bent to pick up Weaver's prostrate body and carried it clumsily over the soft snow to the meagre protection of a nearby cave. Here Johnson was waiting by a small fire that was made from parts of the wreckage. Millet placed the wounded man next to the fire and quickly bandaged the bleeding arm.

"This will have to do," he said as he placed the final knot upon a make-shift sling.

"The others! What about the others?" Weaver asked.

"There are not others," Millet said. "Just the three of us. The rest are dead."

"Well! Well!" the little man, Johnson, said impatiently. "Why stand there like that gaping? Do something! We have to get back to civilization! I have an important appointment in Norman next week. The air company will pay for this!"

"We're nowhere near Norman," Millet said, as if taking delight in puncturing the little man's business-like air. "I talked with the pilot before we crashed, big boy."

"Well? Well?" demanded Johnson.

"There's nothing here. Nothing!" Millet said. "No villages. No cities. No railroads. No radios. Nothing! This part of Canada has been lifeless since way back in 2036."

The three were silent, and for that moment the air was colder and the wind blew with added sharpness. The men shivered and moved together for more warmth.

"Eskimos?" Johnson asked, "there must be Eskimos around here. We'd get food, blubber, fat and all that sort of thing."

Millet slapped his hands together to keep the blood circulating and laughed loudly.

"Point one for civilization!" he said. "Three citizens of New Democracy looking for primitive Eskimos to save them! Ha!"

He suddenly sobered and looked about him, and listened to the howling wind.

"There are no Eskimos here," he said, "When the War Disease came we survived. But the Eskimo is extinct."

"Have we got food?" Johnson asked.

"None," Millet said curtly, to dispel all false hopes.

"I am not sure," Weaver said slowly, "but five minutes before we crashed I—I'm sure I saw a thin line of smoke coming up from a valley. That valley there." he said, pointing toward a mountain range.

"Nonsense!" Millet muttered, looking at the inhospitable icy peaks.

"Nonsense?" Johnson shouted, "What do you mean nonsense? Who are you to say it's nonsense! Maybe there are explorers here, an expedition of some sort. We've nothing to lose. If there's a village we're saved. If not—"

"If not?" Millet asked, smiling.

Johnson ignored him. He drew his meagre overcoat more tightly about him and went out into the whirling snow. The three took one final look at the wreckage of the plane and the bodies that were already covered by a white mantle. Johnson led the way and Weaver followed, his arm rapidly becoming numb. Millet, face down to avoid the bite of the wind, brought up the rear.

THE SUN was already overhead when they reached the mountain top and saw before them in the valley the strange city. It was a city, in the midst of the snow and the wind of arctic winter, and long spirals of grey smoke from snow-covered factories rose up into the heavens.

Dumbfounded, Millet stared at the city in the valley.

"There!" Johnson said triumphantly, "and you said this part of Canada was uninhabited. That's an industrial city of more than twenty thousand people!"

"In the arctic?" Millet asked, almost talking to himself, "so far north?" He raised his arm and pointed to all the sides of the city. "There are no railroads leaving it," he said.

"Maybe they're covered by snow," Johnson said. "Anyway, there are what seem to be flying fields."

They stopped talking and made their perilous way down to the floor of the valley. The des-

cent proved dangerous, for each drift of snow might hide underneath it a deep chasm. By the time they reached the open valley it was nightfall, and the city was a bare three or four miles away.

They saw the lights of the factories go out and the lights of each individual home brighten. The smoke died from the giant chimneys but each individual house had its own tiny waft of smoke pouring out of its own individual chimney.

As they made their way to the city they saw darkness settle upon it. The lights in the homes died down and when they came to its gates, the city was asleep.

The streets were empty of people. The three exhausted men broke into one of the homes and collapsed before an electrically glowing fireplace.

For a time Weaver was dully surprised that the owner of the house did not bother to come downstairs and ask what they wanted, but he was much too tired to question that as sleep settled upon him and Millet and Johnson.

Refreshed, the three woke up with the morning sun and found, much to their surprise, that the house was empty.

Whoever was in during the night had already left. There were unmistakable signs of chairs having been moved and curtains lifted. It was a wooden house, wooden furniture, and all in simple style.

"They probably let us sleep, not wanting to disturb us," Johnson said.

"Any food in the house?" Weaver asked. Millet got up, stretched and yawned, and went to a small room which appeared to be a kitchen. He came back with two loaves of bread and a jar of water.

"This is all I could find," he said, cutting the bread and sharing it with Johnson and Millet.

"H'm," murmured Johnson as he bit into the first slice, "Tough bread, but pretty good."

"Any idea what city this is?" Weaver asked, crunching the bread hungrily.

"No," Millet said between thirsty gulps, "Haven't the faintest idea. Factory town, that's evident."

When they had finished eating, they got up to investigate the house but could find nothing that would help them. There was no printed matter of any sort but for one sign which hung, almost reverently, over the mantlepiece. It read: *"The Day Will Come—Be Ready!"*

The other rooms were bare but for necessary furniture and clothes. The three searched the closets until they found warm coats that would fit them.

"This might seem like stealing," Millet said, "but we'll return them when we find out just what position we're in."

WITH STOMACHS full and warm clothes, Millet, Weaver and Johnson stepped out of the house into the street. It was bitterly cold, but there was no wind. The high mountains that surrounded the valley seemed to protect it from too much snow. Not knowing where to go, they walked aimlessly about the streets. Nowhere could they find a single soul.

"They must all be at the factory," Johnson said.

"And the children?"

"In schools and nurseries."

"But they can't *all* be in factories and schools," protested Weaver. "There's nobody home or in the streets. Nobody!"

"Let's look into a factory," Millet suggested.

In the center of the city they found two factories. Both were of tremendous size, stretching for many times the size of a city block. From their mighty stacks stretched black fingers of smoke. A strange feeling of age hung about the factory. The windows were unwashed. Here and there great cracks were in the walls and through them one could see the working men within. The dull roar of the two factories was almost deafening.

"How old it seems!" Weaver gasped.

"Centuries!" Millet whispered.

"Come! Come!" Johnson said briskly, "We won't get anywhere gaping like that. Let's go in this one here."

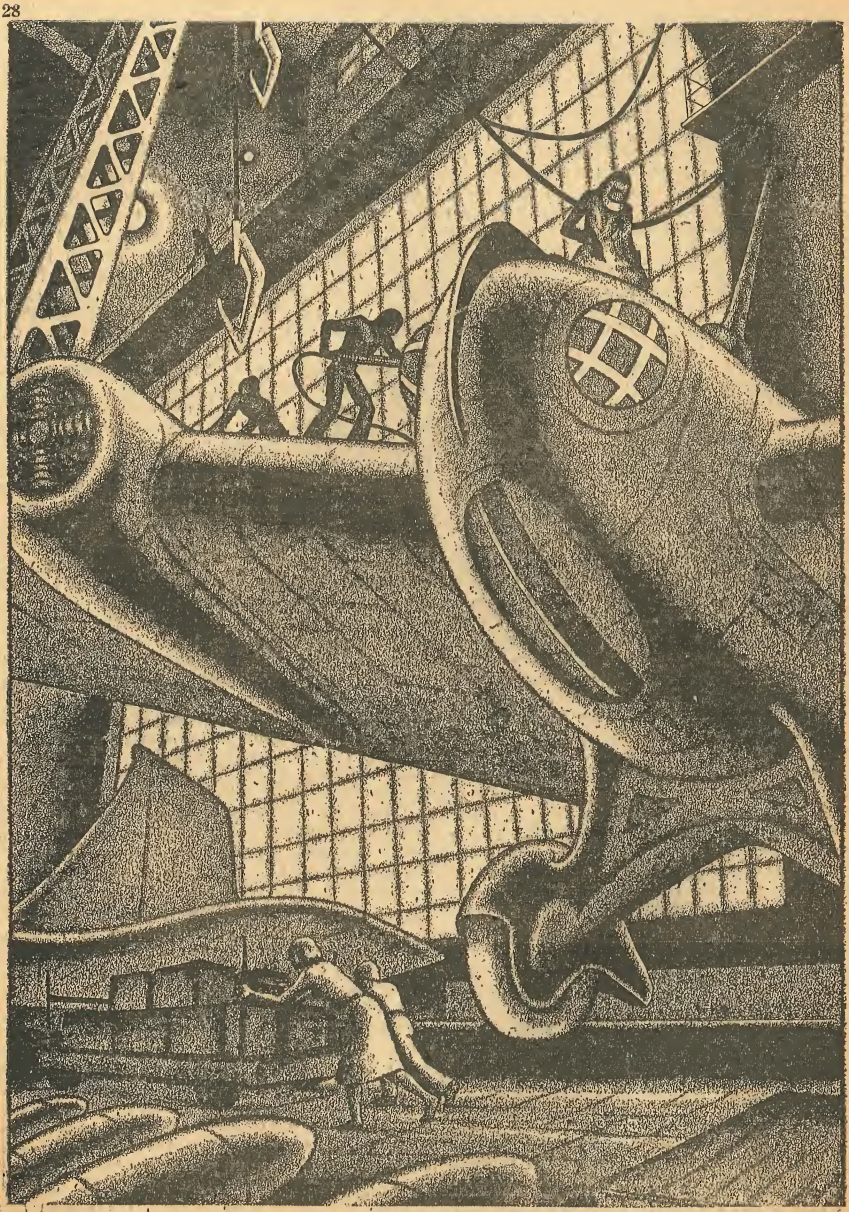
They walked through the aged gate, into the courtyard, and up the wide steps to the door. They opened it, walked in and almost at once were drowned by the clanging and banging of machines in operation. But above the roar of the machines there was yet another sound — the sound of a man's voice, amplified so that it was a booming monotone, overcoming even the shrill screeches of drills and presses.

" . . . be careful. Always be careful," the booming voice in the factory rang out. "Do not make mistakes. Efficiency counts above all else. Efficiency! Work carefully. Work carefully. Work carefully. Work carefully and enjoy your work. Enjoy your work because it is your work. You are working for yourselves. You are working for yourselves. You are working for yourselves . . ."

And on it went, repeating over and over again inane advice to workmen, urging them to greater efforts and constantly giving them an added impetus for faster and faster work.

"Speed-up deluxe!" Millet said, "What a system!"

Inside the factory they saw the working men and women and children. There were thousands of them. Like automatons each leaned forward at his task. Dynamos and power engines, placed in floors beneath the level, pulsed into life and the conveyor belts moved on. The place was a roaring factory in full blast. Giant cranes screeched along, carrying in their iron hands heavy machines which were placed in position by the waiting workmen. Long lines of coarsely clad men and women stood by the conveyors, each with his or her task. Some of the men handled the delicate tools. Others, the women and the children, did nothing but



watch and sometimes help when a moving mass of machines on the belt rumbled and shook as it rolled on a bumpy part of the conveyor. Immediately they would run to it, push it back upon the belt and then go back to their position, their eyes intent again upon the older men and the older women who handled the drills and who placed the parts in positions.

The three walked along the conveyor belts, surprised that no one stopped them to ask who they were and what they were doing here. They ignored the monotonously droning voice that roared above them, seeming to come from microphones hidden in the roof.

Slowly Millet, Weaver and Johnson began to get the complete picture of the strange factory. Huge boxes were brought in from the outside, obviously from the second factory, and were unpacked. The machinery and parts were assorted and distributed. Motors were sent to one place, girders, wires, steel, plates and glass to other places.

The trio followed the distribution from one end to another. By the time they reached the center of the plant they realized what was being made. At the end of the factory, ready to be rolled out, they saw it.

In the center of the huge, open, unrolled door, final finishing touches being placed upon its wings, stood a giant bomber.

"Warplanes!" Millet shouted to Weaver, trying to make himself heard above the din of the factory, "Giant warplanes!"

"WHY HASN'T anyone stopped us?" Weaver asked as they strolled under the wings of the bomber and out into the open air, "Nobody even looked at us while we walked through the whole plant!"

'Suppose they're too busy," Johnson grunted.

"Did you see the children?" Weaver asked again. "Even children! What a factory! It's like a tomb!"

"Efficient though, isn't it?" Millet smiled, "They're getting the bombers out fast enough. Let's see where they take them."

They watched a crew of men roll the bomber out of the hangar-like opening. They pushed it half-way to the open field and then left it there. Another crew, coming from the second factory, marched to it and then rolled it on — to the second plant. The three men followed.

Once they were inside the second plant with the bomber they saw a strange sight. The finished bomber was rolled on to the center of a scaffold-like structure and the careful work of dissembling and taking apart the giant plane began. The wings were carefully taken off, each individual plate tagged and marked. Not one screw was wasted. Nothing was lost.

"I'll be damned!" Johnson said, astonished.

The three men gathered around and watched. There could be no doubt as to what was being done. The bomber, just finished, was now being taken apart. Its component parts would be packed and sent to the first factory where it would be rebuilt.

"An insane vicious circle!" Weaver said.

"They must be crazy!" Johnson said, "There's no sense in that!"

He stepped forward and seized one of the workmen by the shoulders.

"Hey you!" he shouted, "I want to talk to you! What's going on here?"

The man resisted and tried to get back to his position. When Johnson would not let go he turned quickly and struck at Johnson with his wrench. Johnson yelped a cry of surprised pain and let go. The man immediately went back to his spot by the plane as if nothing has happened.

"Dammit!" Johnson shouted to Millet and Weaver. "He struck me! He's crazy! They're all crazy!"

"In a way," Millet said soberly. "Yes. But let's get out of here first."

THEY LEFT the factory and entered one of the nearby homes where the glowing warmth of the fire-place soothed them.

"All right, Millet," Johnson said. "You'll seem to know the answers. What's wrong with the city? Everybody seems to be mad. They won't do anything. They just work—work—work! That's enough to drive anybody mad!"

"And the rhythm!" Weaver said. "That mechanical voice in each factory roaring over and over again — work — work — work! Be careful! Be careful! Be careful! What is it all?"

"It's our heritage," Millet said cryptically.

"Heritage? What heritage?"

"Do you remember your history? The story of the Second World War and even the Third?"

"Of course. Of course," Weaver said, "But this mad city —what has that to do with the wars that took place two centuries ago?"

"Two centuries!" Millet said, "That's it exactly! For more than two hundred years that factory has been building bombing planes for a war that ended two hundred years ago!"

"You're crazy yourself!"

"Crazy, eh? Not as crazy as the facts of history!" Millet said, "Do you remember the bombings of the Second World War? Wave after wave of enemy planes came, blowing up the factories and industrial centers of the enemy. Coventry, Hamburg, Detroit! All of them smashed to bits! When industrial centers were smashed by air-raids, what is the logical answer? Build factories and plants in out of the way places, far from the arm of the airplane!"

"I suppose you'll say that's how this factory was built?"

"Yes! And perhaps there are still more throughout the arctic! Cities of living dead, still making bombs and bombers after all these centuries. They started something that they could not finish. They'll keep on building those bombers till the machines are worn out and become dust!"

"But the people—the people!" Weaver protested.

"The people!" Millet snorted, "Did you hear the phonograph droning over and over again: you must work—you must work—you must work! Over and over again for two hundred years! It enters into the blood! The child is born and hears those words; you must work — you must work—you must work! He spends his days in the factory—watching and watching until the day that his father dies. Then he too goes up to his positions—working — working — working. Not knowing why, nor caring to know!"

"But the same planes are taken apart!"

"One factory was built for producing planes. Another for dismantling the wreckage of planes that were shot down or brought in from the outside. This went on for generation and generation until it became mechanical. And when contact with the outside world finally died, what was more natural than that the process should continue? And it goes on—and on—and on!"

"But what of the food, what of their supplies and clothes and power?"

Millet shrugged and gestured vaguely. "There are some smaller factories on the other side of the city. They must be bakeries and auxiliary plants. Grain, supplies . . . supplies were laid in from the surpluses to last for hundreds of years. These cities expected isolation. They were places of perpetual seige."

A shiver went down Weaver's spine.

"Horrible!" he said.

"Something must be done about it!" Johnson said, indignant.

"What?"

"Stop the factory! Find their source of power—shut it off!"

Millet laughed, "The men would die! They'd go raving mad! You can't stop a thing that's been in the blood for two hundred years! Touch the power plant and they'd rip you to pieces like a wild animal whose food you try to steal!"

"There must be somebody in the city who is intelligent and who has not become a machine," Weaver said. "From the beginning there was some master, some commander who guided things. His descendant might be here. Find him."

"Yes," Millett said, "there might be one someplace."

"Well! Well!" Johnson shouted, "what are we waiting for?"

IT WAS evening and a shrill whistle broke the darkness. The rumble from the factory died down. The conveyors slowed and stopped and the smoke no longer ascended from the chimney.

Long streams of tired men and women walked dully from the factory. Their thin, gaunt bodies moved slowly over the cobbled snowy streets. Their eyes were misty and each one was stooped as if upon his shoulder, the weight of the factory was set.

The three men entered one of the homes. Wordlessly, the woman of the house set three more chairs by the table and placed three more dishes upon it. They ate with the family in silence, and when night came they went to sleep by the fireplace.

In the morning they awoke and followed the family as they dressed and had breakfast. When the whistle of the factory blew the family slowly filed out into the street where hundreds of other families joined them in the procession towards the factory. Wordlessly, Millet, Weaver and Johnson, mingled with the people, constantly alert for an eye that was not dull, for a face that had more than a blank stare. But it was the same with everyone. Dull — blank — mechanical — living dead — living machines.

Thye gathered in long lines outside the factory, and when the second whistle blew they marched slowly in.

The three men watched them go and when all had entered they followed. But instead of entering the plant itself, they walked into all the smaller rooms, hoping to find some clue to the mystery.

On the third floor of the factory, quite by surprise, they found her.

The door of a room was slightly ajar.

"There's some rooms here," Millet said, "let's take a look."

Someone inside must have heard them. The door suddenly closed. Millet walked up to it and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Strange," he said, "the door was open a moment ago."

With his shoulder he pushed tentatively. The wood was old and worn. He stepped back and crashed into the door. It splintered and fell. Millet and the two men entered the room.

Amazed, they stared at the young girl who stood alone, back to the wall, facing them. Her eyes and face did not bear that dull look which characterized every single person in the city. Each movement of hers was catlike and nervous as she moved along the wall further away from them.

"Hello," Millet said softly.

"A voice!" she said, "You speak!"

"Yes, of course we speak," Millet said, walking a bit towards her, "Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you."

"You—you're from the Outside!" she said, fearfully.

"We're friends," Millet said, "We won't hurt you."

"How did you get here?" she asked suddenly.

"By airplane. We crashed . . ."

"Airplane! Bomber!" she said, her voice becoming high pitched till it was almost a scream. "Then it's true what the books said! You've come here to kill all of us! You came here to destroy the factory! You came here to stop the machines! It's you who wanted the war!"

"No. No." Millet insisted, "we are not going to do anything. Nothing, you understand, nothing. There's no war going on. No war."

"No war!" she cried, "there's always war! Always! The Day will come, my father told me and his father told him. There's always war! ALWAYS! THE DAY HAS COME!"

She pressed herself against the wall, shrinking in terror, her knees weakening until she knelt in the corner. Two tears rolled down her cheeks and then sobs shook her body.

"Crazy as a loon," Johnson whispered. Millet bent down and tried to soothe her.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said softly. "We're not going to do anything. Everything's all right. Just stop crying."

She kept on sobbing and then, her confidence won, Millet put his arms around her until her sobs died down.

"This beats everything," Weaver said, scratching his head.

A FEW minutes later the three men and the girl sat around the desk. Her face was still wet with tears, but her fear was now gone.

"What's your name?" Millet asked.

"I have none," she said.

"You were born here?"

"Of course!"

"What do you do here?"

"Nothing. I'm the governor of the factory."

Millet repressed a smile and continued. "Why does the factory run?"

"Everybody knows that — to make airplanes."

"But all the airplanes are taken to the other factory where they are simply taken apart! What's the sense to that?"

She looked at him as if not understanding the question. He repeated it.

"Because," she said, "because we've always done so. That's all! Everybody knows that!"

"But why? Why?"

"I don't know," she said sharply and irritated, "I don't know!"

"Did it ever," he said quietly, "occur to you to stop the machines?"

She stood up, pale with fright and anger.

"Stop the machines?" she asked, trembling. "No! Nobody can do that! Nobody! The factory must go on! It must! It always went on even when the bombers came. Always! Always!"

She was almost hysterical. Millet soothed her and turned to his friends.

"Now try stopping the machines and see what happens!" he said. "This girl is almost normal; think of the others to whom the factory is their heart and soul by birth."

"You're not going to stop the factory! No! No!" she said, "you can't!"

"No," Millet said, "we're not going to stop the factory."

"I always knew," she said softly, "that The Day would come. And it has come! It has come!"

"What Day has come?" Millet asked her, "What Day?"

"The Day when our bombers fly!" she said exultantly. "That Day! I knew it was here when I saw you enter the city!"

"You saw us enter yesterday?" they asked, in great surprise.

"Yes!" she said, "I knew! Today is the Day! I told them, the workingmen, that they should let the bombers fly!"

"Fly?" Millet asked. "Holy Sun! But where? Those bombers fly blind. Their destination was set into the controls over two hundred years ago! Even the moment that they drop their bombs is all set!"

"To the enemy!" she said, "They'll bomb his cities! Smash his factories! Destroy his roads and communications! Destroy him!"

LEAVING her alone the three men rushed to one of the windows and looked out upon the open field. The day before it was empty. Now, upon its white level, were three large black bombing planes.

"They mustn't fly!" Weaver said. "Heaven only knows upon what cities they'll drop their bombs! What a ghastly thing! Ghosts from the past destroying the cities of today!"

Weaver and Johnson rushed to the door but Millet soon called after them.

"It's too late!" he said, "they're leaving!"

It was true. From the window they could see the whirling blades of the propellers as each bomber slowly moved along the runway and up into the air.

The three bombers, like three strange birds, rose high and sped away over the mountain-tops.

In Millet's mind there was a strange thought. Three black bombing planes, relics of the past, were bombing a glorious new city founded upon peace. What a mockery!

But perhaps the planes would never reach the city. Two hundred years had passed. Perhaps the controls were worn. A wearing of a hundredth of an inch and the three bombers would miss their mark.

Perhaps—but the three planes were already lost in the mists of the clouds. Even the roar of their motors had died away.

After two hundred years the Day had come.

THE ENEMY
is coming!
Don't miss the April issue!

THE VORTEX is the dividing line between the science-fiction half of STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES and the fantasy-fiction half. It is also the readers' department wherein you who read our magazine are invited to tell us what you thought of our previous issues and what you suggest for future editorial actions. We shall endeavor to print as many letters as we can and to answer points which require answering. You are invited to write us your opinions on this issue. Our address is 366 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

With this issue, we shall attempt to take up where we left off in June. There has been an unavoidable lapse but we have succeeded in overcoming the technical difficulties which delayed our magazine. We are now monthly and looking ahead to a really lively future. But still there are a large number of letters on hand commenting on our last issue and we shall proceed herewith to present them. We open with a note from **Virginia Combs** of Crandon, Wisconsin:

When, at the tender age of seventeen, I put aside Grimm's Fairy Tales for the last time, I thought that never again could I recapture the tender fantasy of fairy tales. But on reading Cecil Corwin's twin masterpieces I found anew the enchantment and bewitchery of all the dear tales that childhood loves. And yet these are not fairy-stories, unless we who are grown up will admit it, which we won't, but the imagery and beauty of execution, and the gayety of the impossible are ours once more, and at those elfin fires we warm again the hands of childhood's forgotten spirit. If growing up locks us outside the realm of enchantment, then I, for one, shall never grow a day older. Amen.

Cecil Corwin was deeply touched by your note, Miss Combs, and would appreciate your opinion on the current novelette "The Golden Road." It is his first serious fantasy and we thought it very impressive. Another comment on his "Mr. Packer" comes from **Stanley Wiseman** of Denver, Colorado:

Greetings, gate, this is going to be short and sweet. Now personally I have nothing against Bok, but I didn't think that he read "Mr. Packer Goes to Hell." What makes me think this? Well, it's like this: on the first page of Cecil Corwin's fantasy Bok's illustration is positively screwy. It says in the story: " 'Okay, whiskers,' she said, 'put me down.' " Now in the portrait of this, there aren't any whiskers on Almarish.

Otherwise, your June issue was wonderful and, not that it matters, Bok was tops on the cover illustration, along with such writers as Cecil Corwin, Basil Wells, and Kenneth Falconer. Whom we should have more of. Also, why don't you have a sequel to the sequel of "Thirteen O'Clock?"

We asked Bok about the whiskers business, too. He claimed that he had gotten so enthralled in the story that he had quite forgotten that little detail. "Anyway," he says, "maybe the whiskers got singed off in the hot place?" As for a sequel to the Packer tales, we've been under fire from all quarters for one. We're reluctant to give Corwin the go-ahead signal but we can be persuaded. Let those who think a sequel is desirable speak up.

..**Joseph Gilbert** of Columbia, S. C., whom we are beginning to think of as a severe but reliable critic, comments:—

There's only one word to apply to the majority of shorts you use in SSS, and the word is: Clever! Especially does this go for Raymond's d e l i g h t f u l "Spokesman For Terra." I dislike Wells' type of fiction more than I can readily express. But don't take that too seriously. I'm not at all anxious to detract from a really promising beginner and other people doubtless go for the sort of thing he writes. Winterbotham has never written a decent story in his life, and will die never having written a decent story in his life. Kubilius finishes the stf section off capably, however.

The fantasy section — Now you've really got something! Said something consisting of some of the best damn fantasy fiction I ever hope to read in one magazine. The only disappointing thing in the section was "Mr. Packer Goes to Hell." Oh, It was okay, but in comparison with the original the sequel is painfully inadequate.

Lowndes should stick to really good humor like "The Martians

Are Coming," if "The Grey One" is the best he can do in the fantasy line. I happen to know it isn't, happily. Gottesman and Keller were fair.

"The Words of Guru" and "The Silence" I've saved for last. The latter I enjoyed tremendously, but thought "The Words of Guru" its superior. Gad! Such magnificent handling of a horror theme I haven't seen since "Fear." This was a superb job of writing. That's the only word for it. Superb. But both tales were beautifully gruesome and it was a genuine achievemen to be able to print both in the same issue.

Your art now surpasses that of any other stf mag on the stand. Very happy to see you return Dold. How about making it a regular appearance, no? It's nice to see that Forte is no longer among those present, and Bok is still Bok. Anything added to that would be more than superfluous. The cover is striking; a splendid color contrast. Keep up the two color arrangement by all means.

Thank you. We intend to use Dold as often as we can. However we fear that his appearance will be limited insofar as he no longer resides in New York and his time is limited. We have an illustration of his coming up next month and trust we shall be able to present a Dold with every succeeding issue. Dold is greeted by Walter A. Carrithers of Fresno, California:—

Congratulations! Stirring Science Stories is now really going somewhere. Thanx-a-million for the biggest scoop this year. Someone has at last brought Elliott Dold back! The greatest illustrator of stf in the market. Let Dold and Bok (He's No. 3 on my list, Finlay's 2) illustrate SSS, the best illustrated stf magazine of all, beating Campbell and the others, too! Thanx again for Dold!

A brief note from A. L. Schwartz of Dorchestre, Mass.:

Ah! A five star issue of Stirring this time. An excellent cover, six good stories ("Pioneer," "Martian Fantasy," "Human Mice of Kordar," "Trail's End, "Mr. Packer," "The Silence"), very good interior pics by Bok, Dolgov, — hmm, tha's about all.

The only things I want are longer stories and smooth edges. (Do I hear a loud editorial "No?")

No, you don't. The question of story lengths depends on our readers. As for smooth edges, our new size has made that a dead issue. About the first however, R. Cornelius Jones of Decatur, Alabama says:—

I've just finished reading the Vortex department. There I noticed that most of your readers are for longer stories. But, I say unto you, keep them as they are. Two novelettes and the rest short stories. Reason: I don't have time to read long stories at one sitting, and if I read just a little at a time, I tend to lose interest. I'm sure there are many more readers like me . . . ..You're doing fine as it is. Don't make any radical changes! I enjoy Lowndes' short stories.

So you see, readers Schwartz and Jones, that there are two sides to every question. At the present time, we feel that we are giving our readers more satisfaction with a larger number of shorter stories than with a lesser number of longer stories.

Writes Marguerite M. Ward of Klamath Falls, Oregon:—

You have a grand little magazine. We all enjoy the "step ahead" stories. The poem "Earthlight on the Moon" in the June number is especially good. Let us have more poetry of this nature with technical perfection and broader vision. May Stirring Science live long and prosper.

Ray Garfield of St. Louis, Mo. writes:—

I found Burks' "Pioneer" to have an interesting style of approach with a quietly pleasant turn to it. "Martian Fantasy" hit some fine moods in the Martian sequence which was balanced neatly by the melodramatic hypnotic interlude. "Forgotten Tongue" was very good—an exceedingly clever idea handled perfectly. "Spokesman for Terra" was a wow. "Human Mice" was a Burroughs adventure yarn that came off nicely for the magazine's balance. "Jitterbug" seemed to have two different moods to it as if written in two distinct installments. "Trail's End" was a gem.

Corwin is always good and "Mr. Packer" is his best. The Grey One" was a weird little tale. "The Words of Guru" is the star of the magazine — a classic for which I predict growing fame as time goes on. "The Silence" was another quietly terrific yarn. "Kazam Collects" had some fine lines in it. "The Moon Artist" is Keller — and that should be enough for anyone. Sorry, if I can't find a thing to knock—for once I've found a magazine in which I liked everything. And now I'm yelling at the top of my lungs for a monthly appearance. How about it?

A letter like the above is the sort of thing editors dream of receiving but get, alas, so rarely. Mr. Garfield's yelling was heard in our offices all right, we've given him that desired monthly appearance. But remember if we are to keep on improving and keep this magazine one which you will be delighted to rush for each month, we've got to have your advice. The editor can do his share and the writers theirs only if the readers continue to keep us informed as to how we are making out, what are our flaws, and what to do about them. Writing letters to the editor is the one sure way of helping to better the magazine. So, readers, do your share. Write us that letter with your comments on this issue.

Donald A. Wollheim, Editor.

THE GOLDEN ROAD

by Cecil Corwin

While mysterious voices thunder from the skies and a Name is etched in lightning, Colt fights the battle of Good and Evil high up among the mapless mountains at the roof of the world.

Illustrations by Bok

OUT OF the myth of night and language there come strange tales told over wine. There is a man know as The Three Cornered Scar who frequents a Village spot famed for its wine and raconteurs, both of which are above the average.

The Three Cornered Scar favored us by a visit to my table and ordering, during the course of his story, five half-bottles of house red to my account. The wine is drunk up and the story told.

CHAPTER I.

COLT WAS tired. He was so bone-broke weary that he came near to wishing he was dead. It would have been easy to die in the snow; heaps in the way seemed to beg for the print of his body. He skirted crevasses that were like wide and hungry mouths.

This was Central Asia, High Pamir, a good thousand miles from any permanent habitation of the human race. The nomad Kirghiz population had been drained away to the Eastern front, civil and military authorities likewise. Colt himself was the tragic, far-strayed end of the First Kuen-Lung Oil Prospecting Expedition, undertaken by a handful of American volunteers on behalf of the Chungking government.

Estimating generously, his assets were five more days of scanty eating. And an eternity of sleep under the glaring stars of the plateau—?

He had struck, somehow, an easier way across the snow-covered, rocky wastes. There was a route to follow, a winding, mazy route that skirted the Alai Range's jagged foothills and slipped through Pass Tengis-Bai. Old memories of maps and trails swirled through Colt's tired head; he bore North for no better reason than that he could guide by Polaris, low on the horizon. Colt was headed, with a laugh and a curse, for Bokhara.

Colt marched through the first watch of the night, before the smiting cold of space descended on this roof of the world; then he would sleep, twitching with frost. He would wake eight hours later, a stone, a block of wood, to unkink his wretched muscles, shoulder his pack and march under the naked, brassy sun.

The Parsees said that this High Pamir was the cradle of human life, that from here had sprung the primals who proliferated into white, yellow, black and brown. To the southwest, at the same thirteen-thousand elevation, was the Valley of the Oxus, a green ribbon in the steel-grey and bone-white of the plateau. To the north-east were the great peaks—Everest, Kunchunjungra, K4 — that started where other mountains ended, shooting from seventeen thousand up to unthinkable heights, sky-piercing.

Night and day scarcely interrupted the flow of his thoughts. His waking fantasies and his dreams alike were brutish longing for warmth and comfort, bespelled remembrance of palmier days. He woke to find an ear frost-bitten, dead marble white without sensation, killed by cold.

It came to him slowly, the idea forcing its way through the numbed machinery of his brain, that he was following a path. This easier way across the plateau could be nothing but one of the historic caravan routes. Over this trail had gone a billion feet of beasts and men, and his own had found their way into the ancient grooves. Colt was content with that; going by the sun and stars was good, compass better, but best of all were the ways that men had taken and found well-suited.

THERE were animal-dropping before him now and then, once a fragment of broken crockery. He doubled his pace, from a slow plod to a loping, long-strided walk that took much of his husbanded wind. Finally he saw the print in a snowbank that spelled MAN. It was a shod foot's mark, light and side-stepping. As he watched a puff of wind drifted it over with dry, gleaming snow.

Colt found a splash of milk against a rock, then the smell of camel clinging about a wiry shrub.

He saw them at last, the tail of a great caravan, and fell fainting into the arms of tall, curious Kirghiz camel-drivers.

They carried him in a litter until he woke and could eat, for nothing was so important or unexpected that it could be allowed to break the schedule of the march. Colt opened his eyes to grunts of satisfaction from his bearers. He accepted the hunks of dried meat and bottle of warm tea they gave him, trying to catch enough of the language to offer thanks.

Coming down the line of the caravan at a slow trot was a large Hindu on one of the small Mongolian ponies. He reined beside Colt and asked in French: "How are you? They passed me word. Can you march with us?"

"But yes! It's like life out of death to find you people here. What can I do to help?"

The Hindu dismounted to walk the pony beside him. "Keep up spirits. Our few Europeans are tired of each other's company. In case of bandit raiding —highly improbable, of course —you'll fight. I'm Raisuli Batar, merchant of the Punjab. I'm caravan master ,whose word is law. Not that it's necessary— the boys are well behaved and we have enough food."

"Where are we headed?" asked Colt, gnawing on the hunk of meat.

"We started for Bokhara. Come up the line to meet the better sort with me. They're agog with excitement, of course, don't dare break line without my permission, which I don't choose to grant. By way of payload we have crates of soap on the camels and drums of flavoring essence on the ponies."

Colt sniffed, finding wintergreen and peppermint on the air. "May you find a good price," he said respectfully.

Raisuli smiled and the American was pleased. The caravan master was big and solid, with a grim, handsome face. It was good to please a man like that, Colt thought.

They quickened their pace, overtaking a hundred plodding bearers and a herd of sheep. Colt was introduced to a pale, thoughtful man named McNaughton, a reader in history at the University of Glasgow, who said he had been doing field work in Asia for three years.

Farther on were Lodz and wife, two young Poles from Galicia who were hoping for government work in Bokhara. The man was quiet, his English heavily accented. The wife spoke French only, but with the vivid dash of a Parisienne. Her lips were touched with scarlet; here in the wilderness of the High Pamir she wore a freshly-pressed riding habit. Colt was enchanted.

Raisuli cast a glance at the sky. "Bedding down," he snapped. "Excuse me—*c'est l'heure.*"

He left Colt with the Poles, mounting his pony again to gallop down the line barking orders to the various Hindus, Tajiks, Chinese, Abyssinians, Kirghiz and Kroomen who made up the crew. It took no more than a quarter-hour to bring the unwieldy line to a halt; in another quarter hour a thousand felt tents were pitched and pegged, fires lighted and animals staked out.

"He times well, that one," smiled Mme. Lodz. Colt looked up and saw the sky already deepening into black. He shuddered a little and drew nearer to the fire.

"I think," said McNaughton absently, "that I could take a little refreshment." Lodz looked up from under his brows, then clapped his hands. A native boy came running.

"Bring food — some of that cold joint, wallah."

"Yes, sahib."

"Such a night this will be, perhaps," said Mme. Lodz softly, "as it was in August."

"Just such a night," said McNaughton. "Will you join us, Mr. Colt?"

"Not I," said the American with a sense of guilt. "I was fed when I came to after fainting. Is it safe—may I look about?"

He got no answer. The boy had returned with a great haunch of meat; silently the Occidentals gathered about it, taking out knives. Colt watched in amazement as the dainty Frenchwoman hacked out a great slab of beef and tore at it, crammed it down her throat. Before it was swallowed she was cutting away again.

"Ah — I asked if I ought to look about . . ."

Lodz shot him a sidewise glance, his mouth crammed with meat, jaws working busily. Then, as though Colt had never spoken he returned to the serious business of feeding, with the same animal quality as his wife and McNaughton showed.

"I'll look about then," said Colt forlornly. He wandered away from the fire in the direction of a yellow felt tent. There he was delighted to catch words of Cantonese.

"Greetings, son of Han," he said to the venerable speaker.

The fine old Mongol head turned; Colt felt himself subjected to a piercing, kindly scrutiny by two twinkling little black eyes. The ruddy little mouth smiled: "Sit down, son. It's a long time between new friends."

COLT squatted by the fire obediently; the venerable one took a long pull from a bottle of *suntori*, a vile synthetic Japanese whisky. Wiping his mouth with the back of a wrinkled, yellow hand he announced: "I'm Grandfather T'ang. This is my son, T'ang Gaw Yat. If you let him he'll talk you deaf about the time he was on the Long March with the Eighth Route Army. He claims General Chuh Teh once ate rice with him."

T'ang Gaw Yat smiled obediently and a little tolerantly at his father's whimsy. He was a fine-looking Chinese, big-headed and straight-faced, with little wrinkles of laughter playing about his mouth. "What my

father says," he confided, "is strictly true. It was a full thousand miles from—"

"What did I tell you?" broke in the old man. "The slave is his wife, and the smartest one of the lot." He indicated a small Chinese woman of the indeterminate age between twenty and fifty.

She said in English hardly accented: "Hello. You do speak English, don't you? These barbarians don't know anything but their village jargon and Canton talk." The smile took the edge from her harsh words.

Colt introduced himself and answered endless questions on the state of China, military, political and economic.

"Hold off," ordered the woman at last. "Let him have his turn. Want to know anything, Mr. Colt?"

"Wouldn't mind knowing how long you've been travelling."

"Stupid question," broke in Grandfather Han. "Just what one expects from a foreign devil. the splendor of the night closes about him and he would know how long we've been on the march! Have a drink—a small one." He passed the bottle; Colt politely refused.

"Then maybe you'd like a little game—" There clicked in his palm two ivory cubes.

"Please, father," said T'ang Gaw Yat. "Put those away."

"Pattern of ancient virtue!" sneered the old man. "O you child of purity!"

"Grandfather is very lucky," said the woman quietly. "He started on the caravan with nothing but those dice and many years of gambling experience. He is now one of the richest of men on the line of march. He owns two herds of sheep, a riding-camel of his own and the best food there is to be had."

"And drink," said the son somberly.

"Tell you what," said the old man. "You can have some of my V.S.O. stock—stuff I won from a Spaniard month back." He rummaged for a moment in one of the tent-pockets, finally emerged with a slender bottle which caught the firelight like auriferous quartz. "Danziger Goldwasser — *le veritable*," he gloated. "But I can't drink the stuff. Doesn't bite like this Nipponese hell-broth." He up-ended the bottle of *suntori* again, passed the brandy to Colt.

The American took it, studied it curiously against the fire. It was a thin, amber liquor, at whose bottom settled little flakes. He shook them up into the neck of the bottle; it was like one of the little globular paperweights that hold a mimic snowstorm. But instead of snow there were bits of purest beaten gold to tickle the palate and fancy of the drinker.

"Thanks," he said inadequately. "Very kind of you."

"Curious, isn't it," said the woman, "how much the caravan life resembles a village? Though the wealth, of course is not in land but in mercantile prospects — " She stopped as Colt caught her eye. Why, he wondered, had she been rattling on like that?

"The wisdom of the slave is the folly of the master," said Grandfather T'ang amiably. "He is happy who learns to discount the words of a woman."

"Suppose," said the woman slowly and quietly, "you learn to mind your own business, you poisonous old serpent?"

"They can't stand common sense," confided the old man.

Colt felt, painfully, that he had wandered into a family quarrel. He bolted with a mumbled excuse, hanging onto the bottle of brandy. He stood for a moment away from the trail and stared down the long line of fires. There were more than a thousand, snaking nearly out of sight. The spectacle was restful; the fires were a little blue, being kindled largely out of night-soil briquettes.

The sky was quite black; something had overcast the deep-ranked stars of the plateau. No moon shone.

Colt settled against the lee of a rock in a trance. He heard winds and the hiss of voices, soft in the distance. It was the quiet and complaining Tajiki dialect. He could hear it and understand it. It was absurdly simple, he thought abstractedly, to pick out the meanings of words and phrases.

"Such a night," one was saying, "as in August. You remember?"

"I remember." Then, dark and passionate: "The limping, bloody demon! Let him come near and I'll tear his vitals!"

"Surely you will not. He is the tearer in his evil work. We are the torn—"

Colt sat up with a start. What the hell! He couldn't understand Tajiki, not one little word of it! He had been dreaming, he thought. But it didn't melt away as a dream should. The memory of the overheard conversation was as sharp and distinct as it could be, something concrete and mysterious, like a joke that hadn't been explained to him.

CHAPTER II.

THEN there was a sort of heavenly grumbling, like a megatherial word or more. Colt twisted and stared at the zenith, could see nothing at all. The rumbling ended; Colt saw black little figures all down the line rise and attend, twisting and staring and buzzing to each other.

He hurried to the fire of his European friends. They were sprawled on blankets, their bodies a little swollen from the enormous meal they had eaten. Colt saw the bare bone of the joint, scraped by knife-edges. The Occidentals were unconcernedly smoking.

"What was that racket?" he asked, feeling a little silly. "What was it— do you know?"

"Thunder," said McNaughton noncommitally.

"*Oui*," agreed Mme. Lodz, puffing a long, tip-gilt cigarette. "Did it frighten you, the thunder?"

Colt pulled himself together. There was something evasive here, something that sought to

elude him. "It was *peculiar* thunder," he said with glacial calm. "There was no lightning to precede it."

"The lightning will come soon," said Lodz furtively. "I tell you so you will not be alarmed."

"You have your lightning after your thunder here? Odd. In my country it's just the other way around." He wasn't going to break — he *wasn't* going to swear—

"But how boring," drawled the Pole's wife. "*Never* a change?"

He *wasn't* going to break—

Then the peculiar lightning split the skies. Colt shot one staggered, incredulous glance at it, and was dazzled.

It was a word, perhaps a name, spelled out against the dead-black sky. He knew it. It was in some damned alphabet or other; fretfully he chided himself for not remembering which of the twenty-odd he could recognize it could be.

Colt realized that the Occidentals were staring at him with polite concern. He noticed a shred of meat between the teeth of Mme. Lodz as she smiled reassuringly—white, sharp teeth, they were. Colt rubbed his eyes dazedly. He knew he must be a haggard and unseemly figure to their cultured gaze — but they hadn't seen the words in the sky—*or had they—?*

Politely they stared at him, phrases bubbling from their lips:

"So frightfully sorry, old man—"

Wouldn't upset you for the world—"

"Hate to see you lose your grip—"

Colt shook his head dazedly, as though he felt strands of sticky silk wind about his face and head. He turned and ran, hearing the voice of Raisuli Batar call after him: "Don't stray too far—"

He didn't know how long he ran or how far he strayed. Finally he fell flat, sprawled childishly, feeling sick and confused in his head. He looked up for a moment to see that the caravan fires were below some curve of rock or other, at any rate, well out of sight. They were such little lights, he thought. Good for a few feet of warm glow, then sucked into the black of High Pamir. They made not even a gleam in the night-heavy sky.

And there, on the other side of him and the caravan, he saw the tall figure of another human being. She stood on black rock between two drifts of snow.

Colt bit out the foil seal of the brandy bottle and pulled the cork with his fingers. After a warm gulp of the stuff he rose.

"Have a drink?"

She turned. She was young in her body and face, Mongoloid. Her eyes were blue-black and shining like metal. Her nose was short, Chinese, yet her skin was quite white. She did not have the eyefold of the yellow people.

Silently she extended one hand for the bottle, tilted it high. Colt saw a shudder run through her body as she swallowed and passed him the tall flask with its gold-flecked liquor.

"You must have been cold."

"By choice. Do you think I'd warm myself at either fire?"

"Either?" he asked.

"There are two caravans. Didn't you know?"

"No. I'm just here—what's the other caravan?"

"Just here, are you? Did you know that you're dead?"

Colt thought the matter over slowly, finally declared: "I guess I did. And all these others —and you—?"

"All dead. We're the detritus of High Pamir. You'll find, if you look, men who fell to death from planes within the past few years walking by the side of Neanderthalers who somehow strayed very far from their tribes and died. The greatest part of the caravans come, of course, from older caravans of the living who carried their goods from Asia to Europe for thousands of years."

Colt coughed nervously. "Have another drink," he said. "Then let's see this other caravan. I'm not too well pleased with the one I fell into."

She took his hand and guided him across the snow and black rock to back within sight of his own caravan. He stared, eager and hungry to see. As she pointed with one tapering finger it seemed that many things were clearer than they ever had been before. He saw that the long line of lights was not his caravan but another in the opposite direction, parallelling his.

"There you will see *their* caravan master," she said, putting her face next to his. He looked and saw a pot-bellied monster whose turban was half as high as its wearer. Its silhouette, as it passed before a fire, was indescribably unpleasant.

"Evening prayer," said his guide, with a faint tone of mockery.

He studied them as they arranged flares before a platform flung together out of planks and trestles; he also saw them assemble a sort of idol, fitting the various parts together and bolting them securely. When the thing was perhaps two-thirds assembled he turned away and covered his face, repelled.

"I won't look at the rest of it now," he said. "Perhaps later, if you wish me to."

"That's right," she said. "It isn't a thing to look at calmly. But you will see the rest of it one time or another. This is a very long caravan."

She looked down and said: "Now they are worshipping."

Colt looked. "Yes," he said flatly. They were worshipping in their own fashion, dancing and leaping uglily while some dozen of them industriously blew or sawed fantastic discords from musical instruments. Others were arranged in a choir; as they began to sing Colt felt cold nausea stirring at the pit of hi belly.

THEIR singing was markedly unpleasant; Colt, who enjoyed the discords of Ernest Bloch and Jean Sibelius found them stimulatingly revolting. The choir droned out a minor melody, varying it again and again with what Colt construed to be quartertone chords, split-interval harmonic variations on such old friends as C Major and B Flat Minor. He found he was listening intently, nearly fascinated by the ugly sounds.

"Why are they doing it?" he asked at length.

"It is their way," she said with a shrug. "I see you are interested. I, too, am interested. Perhaps I should not discuss this before you have had the opportunity of making up your own mind. But as you may guess, the caravan below us there, where they make the noises, is Bad. It is a sort of marching gallery of demons and the black in heart. On the other hand, the caravan with which you found yourself previously, is Good — basically kind and constructive, taking delight in order and precision."

Colt, half-listening, drew her down beside him on the rock. He uncorked the bottle. "You must tell me about yourself," he said earnestly. "It is becoming difficult for me to understand all this. So tell me about yourself if you may."

She smiled slowly. "I am half-caste," she said. "The Russian revolution—so many attractive and indigent female aristocrats, quite unable to work with their hands . . . many, as you must know, found their way to Shanghai.

"There was a Chinese merchant and my mother, a princess. Not furstin — merely a hanger-on at court. I danced. When I was a small child already I was dancing. My price was high, very high at one time. I lost popularity, and with it income and much self-assurance. I was a very bad woman. Not bad as those people there are bad, but I was very bad in my own way.

"Somehow I learned mathematics—a British actuary who knew me for a while let me use his library, and I learned quickly. So I started for India, where nobody would hire me. I heard that there was a country to the North that wanted many people who knew building and mathematics and statistics. Railway took me through the Khaiber and Afghanistan — from there pony and litter—till I died of exposure seven months ago. That is why we meet on High Pamir."

"Listen," said Colt. "Listen to that." It was again the megatherial voices, louder than before. He looked at the woman and saw that her throat-cords were tight as she stared into the black-velvet heavens.

Colt squinted up between two fingers, snapped shut his eyelids after a moment of the glaring word across the sky that followed the voices. He cursed briefly, blinded. Burned into the backs of his eyes were the familiar characters of the lightning, silent and portentous.

"It doesn't do to stare into it that way," said the woman. "Come with me." He felt for her hand and let her pull him to his feet. As sight returned he realized that again they were walking on rock.

"And there's the Good and holy caravan at evening devotions," said the woman, with the same note of bedrock cynicism in her voice. And they were. From his coigne of vantage Colt could see Raisuli Batar solemnly prostrating himself before a modestly-clad, well-proportioned idol whose face beamed kindly on the congregation through two blue-enameled eyes. There was a choir that sang the old German hymn: "Ein Feste Burg."

"Shocking," said the woman, "yet strangely moving to the spirit. One feels a certain longing . . ."

Bluntly Colt said: "I'd like to join them. You're holding me back, you know. I wouldn't see you as a comrade again if I sang with them." He hummed a bar of the hymn: "*On Earth is not his e-qual—*"

"Girding their loins for the good fight," said the woman. She chuckled quietly for a moment. In a ribald tone that seemed barely to conceal heartbreak she snapped: "Do you care to fall in with the ranks of the Almighty? Or may it be with the Lord of Nothing, Old Angra Mainyu of the sixteen plagues? Pick your sides in the divine sweepstakes! It's for you they do it and of a great love for the soul in you. They want you black and they want you white—how in blazes do you know who's right?

"It *seems* clear," said Colt doubtfully.

"You think so?" she exploded. "You think so now? Wait and see—with them tearing at your heart two ways and you sure that it'll never hold out but it's going to rip in half, and it never doing that but you going on through the night thirteen thousand meters above the world of men and never a soft bed and never a bite of real food and never a moment of closing your eyes and sleeping in darkness and night!"

She collapsed weeping into his arms.

CHAPTER III.

THE LONG, starless night had not lifted; three times more the voices had spoken from the heavens and silent lightning scribbled across the sky. The two in-betweeners had chanted back and forth sacred writings of Asia, wretchedly seeking for answers:

"I will incline mine ears to a parable: I will open my dark sayings upon the harp. Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil when the iniquity of my heels shall compass me about?"

"O maker of the material world, thou holy one! When the good waters reach the left in-

step whereon does the Drukh Nasu rush?"

There was an explosion of cynical laughter above them, old and dry. Grandfather T'ang greeted them: "Be well, Valeska and Colt. And forget the insteps and the heels of the Upanishad. That is my counsel." He upended the *suntori* bottle and flushed his throat with a half-pint of the stuff.

In reply to Colt's surprised glance she replied: "He often visits me. Gaw is a terrible old man who thinks nothing of lying and being untrue to himself."

"A little of that would do you no harm, daughter. I belong out here with you, of course. But out here are no likely candidates for the dice-box, and this ethereal gullet refuses to do without alcohol. Though this ethereal brain could do with considerably less of the pious nonsense that invariably accompanies winning at dice."

He painfully squatted by them, keeping a death-group on the quart bottle. "They're going to be at it again," said the old man. "It's just such a night as in August. Tooth and nail, hammer and tongs, no holds barred." He spat on the rock. "Pah! These spectacles disgust a man of my mentality!"

"You see?" asked the woman. "He lies and cheats at dice. Yet often he sings with the worshippers. And always he says he spits on them in his mind. He is terrible!"

Colt quoted slowly: "Judge me and plead my cause against the ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and the unjust man."

"Ah?" asked Grandfather T'ang. "Sacred books? Wisdom of the East? I join your symposium with the following, reverently excerpted from the Shuh King: 'The soil of the province was whitish and mellow. Its contribution of revenue was of the highest of the highest class, with some proportion of the second. Its fields were of the average of the second class.'" He grinned savagely and drank deep again.

"You can't be right," said Colt. "You *can't* be. There's something that forbids it being right to lie now that you're dead. It doesn't matter which side you choose — whether it's Raisuli's smiling idol or that thing the other side of the ridge. But you have to choose."

"I'm different," said T'ang smugly. "I'm different, and I'm drunk two-thirds of the time, so what's the difference if I'm different?" He began raucously to sing, beating time with the bottle, the one and only Confucian hymn:

"Superiority in a person should
better not nor should it
worsen;
It should consider everything
from pussycat to honored
king.
Inferior people need a steeple
To climb and shout
Their views about."

Colt drew a little aside with Valeska. "Should this matter?" he asked.

"He really ought to choose one caravan or another. It's very wrong of him to pretend to be with one when he's really with neither. Either the Good or the Bad . . ."

She stared quaintly into Colt's eyes: "Do you think I'm bad?"

"No," said Colt slowly. "I know you're not. And you aren't good either. Not by nature, practice or inclination. I'm the same as you. I want to sing their devil-song and a Luther hymn at the same time. And it can't be done."

"And you aren't a liar like that lovable old drunk rolling on the rocks there," she said with a gesture. "At least you aren't a liar."

"I congratulate myself. I can appreciate it to the full. Have a drink, Valeska."

"Yes. There is, you know, going to be a holy war. Which side should we be on?"

"Who knows? Let's take another look at the Bad boys." There was half a pang of terror in his heart — a formless fear that he might find Badness less repugnant to him than Goodness. He knew the feeling; it was the trial of every human soul torn between one thing and another. Doubt was Hell—worse than Hell—and it had to be resolved, even at the risk of this magnificent creature by his side.

Silently he passed the bottle as the sky lightened and the silence spoke out of the heavens.

"As you wish," she said. Colt felt a sort of opening in his mind, as though unspoken words had passed between them. He had heard her think in sorrow and fear of losing him.

SHE LED him over a ridge to the long line of fires of the Bad caravan, fires blue-tipped before the ugly alter. There was a disemboweled sacrifice in its lap. Colt stared his fill, trying to probe what was in his own heart. It was neither pleasure nor pain, neither pompous virtue nor cackling glee in destruction and death. There were techniques of self-searching now open to him that could never be those of a living man; he shuddered to think of how he had groped in darkness and ignorance before his death.

The caravan master, squat monster in the mighty turban, greeted him warmly: "We've been watching your progress with considerable interest, my son. We have felt that you were warming to our ideas. How do you feel about community?"

Colt rolled back his consciousness into the dark recesses of his mind, exploring a new stock of knowledge — things that it seemed he must always have known, but never recognized till now for what they were. 'Community'—that meant the mutual practice of evil and destruction. One of the tid-bits of wisdom newly in his mind was an awareness that the Bad worked together, sealed in a union that bore death as its bond. The Good practiced alone, rising

very seldom to a Community of any respectable proportions.

"May I enter the bond tentatively?" he asked.

The master looked pained. "My son of abomination," he said kindly, "I'll have to ask you to be very careful. The balance is beautifully precise; it would be a shame to throw them out of kilter. But since you wish to go ahead, very well. Enter!"

Colt squatted on the ground with numerous others of the Bad people. He sent out a consoling line of thought to Valeska, who stood somberly by, fearing to lose her solitary ally. She smiled a little and ran back a signal of reassurance.

He trembled a little with the effort, then threw back his mind like a door. The inverging flood of black, glistening stuff gave him a warm feeling of comradeship with the others; he yielded and allowed himself to drift with them.

He inspected the attitude of which he was a part, found it consisted of a series of aesthetic balances among eye, ear, touch, smell and taste. The viewpoint was multiplex, dirigible, able to rise, enlarge, focus from infinity to zero, split ways to examine an object from all vantages.

The viewpoint inspected a rock from about a dozen feet in the air, saw it as a smoothly prolate spheroid. There was a moment of dwelling on the seeming fact of its perfection, a painful moment, then the viewpoint descended slowly and with little waves of pleasure as chips and scars became apparent in the rock. The viewpoint split, surveyed the rock, correlated its observations and registered the fact that the rock was of an eccentric shape, awkward and unbeautiful.

The viewpoint coalesced again and s h r a n k microscopically, then smaller still. For an ecstatic moment it perceived a welter of crashing, blundering molecules, beetling about in blindness,

It shifted again, swiftly, far away to a point in Hong Kong where a lady was entertaining a gentleman. The viewpoint let the two human's love, hate, disgust, affection and lust slide beneath its gaze. There was a gorgeous magenta jealously from the man, overlaying the woman's dull-brown, egg-shaped avarice, both swept away in a rushing tide of fluxing, thick-textured, ductile crimson-black passion.

The viewpoint passed somewhere over a battlefield, dwelt lovingly on the nightmare scene below. There were dim flares of vitality radiating from every crawling figure below; a massing of infantry was like a beacon. From the machinery of war there came a steely radiance which waxed as it discharged its shell or tripped its bomb, then dimmed to a quiet glow of satisfaction.

A file of tanks crawled over a hill emitting a purplish radiance which sent out thin cobwebs of illumination. They swung into battle formation, crept down the slope at the infantry mass. Behind the infantry anti-tank guns were hurrying up—too late. The tanks opened fire, their cobwebs whitening to a demon's flare of death as soldiers, scurrying for cover, one by one, keeled over. As each fell there was a brittle little tingle, the snapping of a thread or a wire, and the light of vitality was extinguished, being replaced by a sallow, corpsey glow.

The viewpoint gorged, gloated, bloated on the scene, then seemed to swell immeasurably.

Suddenly, after a wringing transition-feeling, it was in a mighty hall, approaching a lightless apse where two little points of radiance gleamed.

There was music, harmonising ear, eye, taste, touch and smell in a twilit blend of sensation. Colt struggled involuntarily, felt himself bathed in rythmic complications, subtly off-pleasure, spoiled by the minute introduction of some unharmonious element. With dis-

may he felt there creeping into his own consciousness, his segment of the viewpoint, a simple little flicker of a theme in C Major. He was conscious of a gnat's-wing-beat of disapproval in response to his untoward disturbance. The viewpoint continued its drift toward the darkened apse.

It lovingly picked out the inhabitant of the lightless space and greeted it, even Colt, even though it was a monster of five legs and incredible teeth which opened wide. Damnably, irritatingly, the little C Major motif persisted; he tried to drive it from his mind, then, in a fatal moment, recognized it as one Oliver's "Flower Song," a sweet little thing suitable for small hands on the pianoforte.

"— *lilies, roses, flowers of every hue*—" He couldn't lose it after having recognized it that far; the theme spread and orchestrated through the viewpoint. The whole polysensual off-pleasure matrix broke up, tore wide open, as it was about to pass down the gullet of the monster in the apse.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising. "I simply couldn't help—"

"I know," said the caravan master sadly. "I know what it was. But you wrecked a full communion all the same. Go in torment, my son of abomination. May your ways be woeful."

Colt thanked him and left with Valeska.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Indescribable," he exploded. "Loathesome—glorious, terrible. I found myself gloating over—" He went into details.

"So did I," she said absently. "I went through it too. It has a gorgeous kick to it, no doubt. But it isn't right for us. Me, I broke up their communion with a line from Pushkin: "*The aged sorcerer in anger said, This queen is evil straight from toe to head.*" You know it?"

The sound of singing came from over the ridge, blurred by the megatherial voices. Colt stared abstractedly at the sky as the words scribbled again in light. "Their turn." he said. "The Good boys."

CHAPTER IV.

THEY stepped over ridges of snowy rock and stood for a moment surveying the other caravan. There was a semicircle of faces, gleaming benevolently in the firelight, handsome smiling faces. They were singing, under the pleasant aspect of the blue-eyed idol, a lusty slab from the great Bach's great Mass in B Minor. While Valeska smiled a little cynically, Colt side-stepped into the baritone choir and sounded back tentatively for the words and music. They came easily; he was experiencing again, for the first time in many years, the delights of close harmony that move men to form barber-shop quartets and Philharmonic Societies.

He sang the hearty, solid language, the crashing chords, from his chest, standing straight, bouncing the tones from his palate like the old glee-clubber that he was. Beside him he saw Lodz, a beatific smile on his face, chanting sonorously. Why were so many small men bassos?

Colt forgot himself and sang, let his voice swim out into the pool of sound and melt into harmony; when need was he sang up, playing off against Mme. Lodz's mezzo and McNaughton's ringing tenor. And then he sang a sinister quarter-tone. It ended the bar on a gorgeously askew chord and got him very severly looked at. Raisuli Batar, baton in hand, frowned. Colt signalled wildly back that he couldn't help it.

It might have been lack of control, but it wasn't. It seemed that musical virtuosity was a gift to the dead. He had no choice in the matter — it was his nature that had dictated the quarter-tone. Raisuli Batar tapped a rock twice with the baton, then swept down, his left hand signalling volume, cuing in with his eyes the bassos.

The brilliant, crashing unison passage rang out. Damn! As though he had no control over his own voice Colt sang, not in unison but in sinister sharps and flats, botching the grand melody completely.

He strode angrily from the semicircle of singers, back to Valeska. She passed the bottle with a twisted smile on her face.

"You tried to compromise," she said. "It can't be done. They didn't thank you for Stravinsky-ing their Bach."

"Right," he said. "*But what do we do?*"

"It doesn't seem right," she brooded. "We shouldn't be the only in-betweeners. Five thousand years — more — they must appear more often. Then something happens to them. And they go away somewhere."

"Right," crowed Grandfather T'ang, drunker than ever. "Right, m'lass. And I know what happens to them. And I'll tell you what to do."

"Why?" asked Colt practically.

"Because I'm not as far outside as you think, children. Once I was as far in-between as you. I had my chance and I missed it — passed it up for the *suntori* and the dice-games around the fires. Grandather was a fool. I can't tell you any more than this: get into the battle and observe rather closely. When you discover a very important secret you will ascend to the Eighteenth Orbit and dwell forever, dancing and singing on the rings of Saturn. Or, to discard the gibberish, your psychic tissues so alter that your recognize a plane of existance more tenuous than ours; a plane, one suspects, more delectable. The mythological name for it is Heaven." He hugged his bottle and crooned affectionately to it:

"*Superiority in a person should better not nor should it* —"

"*Does* he know?" asked Colt, looking out into the long night.

"He wasn't lying this time. Shall we do it?"

"We shall. This waiting blasts my ethereal soul."

"You're an impatient cuss," she smiled at him. "You haven't seen me dance yet. I was a well-paid dancer once. It should be worth your while."

"Dance, then," he said, settling himself against a rock.

"You make the music. You know how."

He thought for a moment, then uncovered another bit of technique known to the dead. He began to send out mentally Debussy's *Au Claire de Lune*. She heard it, smiled at him as she caught the music and began to dance.

Her body was not very good; certainly not as good as it had been. But as he studied the dancing, sometimes with eyes closed so that he could hear the rustle only of her feet on snow and sometimes so abstracted that he could hear only the displacement of air as she moved, Colt was deeply stirred.

He tuned in on her thoughts, picking out the swiftly-running stream, the skittering little point of consciousness that danced over them.

"Now I am a swan," said her thoughts while she danced to the music. "Now I am a swan, dying for love of the young prince who has wandered through the courtyard. And now I am the prince, very pretty and as dumb as a prince could be. Now I am his father the King, very wrathy and pompous. And now, and through it all, I was really the great stone gargoyle on the square top-tower who saw all and grinned to himself."

She pirouetted to an end with the music, bowing with a stylized, satirically cloying grace. He applauded lustily.

"Unless you have other ideas," she said, "I would like to dance again." Her face was rosy and fresh-looking.

He began to construct music in his mind while she listened in and took little tentative steps. Colt started with a split-log-drum's beat, pulse speed, low and penetrating. He built up another rythm overlaying it, a little slower, with wood-block timbre. It was louder than the first. Rapidly he constructed a series of seven polyrythmic layers, from the bottom split-log pulse to a small, incessant snare-drum beat.

COLT listened in on the dancer's swirling thoughts as he studied her steps and kept the percussional counterpoint going.

Valeska told him: "I'm an animal now, a small, very arboreal animal. I can prick up my ears; my toes are opposed so I can grasp a branch."

He added a bone-xylophone melody, very crude, of only three tones. "My eyes are both in front of my face. My vision has become stereoscopic. I can sit up and handle leaves. I can pick insects from the branches I live in."

Colt augmented the xylophone melody with a loud, crude brass. Valeska thought: "I'm bigger — my arms are longer. And I often walk little distances on the ground, on my feet and my arm-knuckles."

Colt added a see-sawing, gutty-sounding string-timbre, in a melody opposed to the xylophone and the brass: "I'm bigger — bigger — too big for trees. And I eat grubs as well as leaves — and I walk almost straight up — see me walk!" He watched her swinging along the ground, apish, with the memory of brachiation stamped in every limb. He modified the bone-xylophone's timbre to a woody ring, increased the melodic range to a full octave.

With tremendous effort Valeska heaved over an imaginary rock, chipped at it: "I'm making flint hand-axes. They kill animals bigger than I am — tigers and bears—see my kitchen-heap, high as a mountain, full of their bones!"

He augmented with a unison choir of wood-winds and a jangling ten-string harp: "I eat bread and drink beer and I pray to the Nile — I sing and I dance, I farm and I bake — see me spin rope! See me paint pictures on plaster!"

A wailing clarionet mourned through the rythmic sea. Valeska danced statelily: "Yes — now I'm a man's woman — now I'm on top of the heap of the ages — now I'm a human — now I'm a woman . . ."

Colt stopped short the whole accumulation of percussion, melody and harmony in a score of timbres, cutting in precisely a single blues piano that carried in its minor, sobbing-sad left hand all the sorrow of ages, in the serpentine-stabbing chords splashed gold by the right sang the triumph of man in his glory of metal and stone.

Valeska danced, sending out no words of what the dance was, for it was her, what she dreamed, what she had been and what she was to be. The dance and the music were Valeska, and they ended when she was in Colt's arms. The brandy-bottle dropped from his grip and smashed on the rock.

Their long, wordless community was broken by a disjointed yell from the two sides of the ridge as fighting forces streamed to battle. From the Bad caravan came the yell: "Kill and maim! Destroy! Destroy!" And the Good caravan cried: "In the name of the right! For sanctity and peace on Earth! Defend the right!"

Colt and Valeska found themselves torn apart in the rush to attack, swept into the thick of the fighting. The thundering voices from above, and the lightning, were almost continuous. The blinding radiance rather than the night hampered the fighting.

They were battling with queer, outlandish things — frying pans, camp stools, table-forks. One embattled defender of the right had picked up a piteously bleating kid and was laying about him with it, holding its tiny hooves in a bunch.

Colt saw skulls crack, but nobody gave way or even fell. The dead were immortal. Then what in blazes was all this about? There was something excruciatingly wrong somewhere, and he couldn't fathom what it was.

He saw the righteous and amiable Raisuli Batar clubbing away with a table-leg; minutes later he saw the fiendish and amiable chief of the Bad men swinging about him with another.

Vaguely sensing that he ought perhaps to be on the side of the right he picked up a kettle by the handle and looked about for someone to bean with it. He saw a face that might be that of a fiend strayed from Hell, eyes rolling hideously, teeth locked and grinding with rage as its owner carved away at a small-sized somebody with a broken-bladed axe.

He was on the verge of cracking the fiend out of Hell when it considered itself temporarily at least finished with its victim and turned to Colt. "Hello, there," snapped the fiend. "Show some life, will you?"

Colt started as he saw that the fiend was Lodz, one of the Good men. Bewildered he strayed off, nearly being gouged in the face by Grandfather T'ang, who was happily swinging away with a jagged hunk of *suntori* bottle, not bothering to discriminate.

But how *did* one discriminate? It came over him very suddenly that one didn't and couldn't. The caravaneers were attacking each other. At that moment there came through a mental call from Valeska, who had just made the same discovery on her own. They joined and mounted a table, inspecting the sea of struggling human beings.

"It's all in the way you look at them," said Valeska softly.

Colt nodded. "There was only one caravan," he said in somber tones.

He experimented silently a bit, discovering that by a twiddle of the eyes he could convert Raisuli Batar into the Bad caravan leader, turban and all. And the same went for the Bad idol — a reverse twiddle converted it into the smiling, blue-eyed guardian of the Good caravan. It was like the optical illusion with the three shaded cubes that point one way or the other, depending on how you decide to see them.

"That was what Grandfather T'ang meant," said the woman. Her eyes drifted to the old man. He had just drained another bottle; with a businesslike swing against a rock he shattered the bottom into a splendid cutting-tool and set to work again.

"There's no logic to it," he said forlornly. "None at all." Valeska smiled happily and hugged him.

Colt felt his cheek layed open.

"BON SOIR. Dankeschoen. Buon giorno. Buenos dias. Bon soir. Dankeschoen. Buon—"

"You can stop that," said Colt struggling to his feet. He cracked his head against a strut, hung on dazedly. "Where's —"

He inspected the two men standing before him with healthy grins. They wore the Red Army uniform under half-buttoned flying suits. The strut that had got in his way belonged to a big, black helicopter; amidships was blazoned the crimson star of the Soviet Union.

"You're well and all that, I fawncy?" asked one of the flyers. "We spotted you and landed — bunged up your cheek a bit — Volanov heah *would* try to overshoot."

"I'm fine," said Colt, feeling his bandage. "Why'n hell can't you Russians learn to speak American?"

The two soldiers exchanged smiles and glances. They obviously considered Colt too quaint for words. "Pile in, old chap. We can take you as far as Bokhara — we fuel at Samarkand. I — ah — suppose you have papers?"

Colt leaned against the strut and wearily shoved over his credentials. Everything would be all right. Chungking was in solid with the Reds at the moment. Everything would be all right.

They took off.

"I fawncy," said Volanov making conversation while his partner handled the helicopter vanes, "youah glad to see the lawst of all that."

Colt looked down, remembered and wept.

"I FIND," I said as dryly as possible, "a certain familiarity — a nostalgic ring, as it were — toward the end of your tale." I was just drunk enough to get fancy with The Three Cornered Scar.

"You do?" he asked. He leaned forward across the table. *"You do?"*

"I've read widely in such matters," I hastily assured him, pouring another glass of red wine.

He grinned glumly, sipping. "If I hadn't left half my spirit with Valeska that night I was dead," he remarked conversationally, "I'd smash your face in."

"That may be," I assented gracefully.

But I should say that he drank less like half a spirit than half a dozen.

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THE GOBLINS WILL GET YOU

by Hugh Raymond

When playing poker with goblins, be careful what you bid. Particularly if the goblins have ulterior purposes.

Illustration by Bok

IT SHOULDN'T have happened to a dog.

I woke up one night and saw them grinning over the counterpane at me like a row of painted heads off a Coney Island three-sheet. The time was three o'clock as I could easily see by the luminous hands of my alarm clock. Oddly enough I remained unshocked.

They explained later that a sort of preparatory hyponosis had been worked — involving a lot of ground-up vegetable greens I found under my bed every night for a week before and couldn't up to then account for.

I lay quietly and simply stared and they stared back. I was a bit upset, of course, but none of your "crawling feeling down the spine" stuff. The faces were inhuman, distorted, elongated, squashed, some nauseating, others merely enough to make one squeamish. And the glow which backgrounded the whole scene took away a lot of the mystery. They had hands and feet—plainly seen — and they didn't float.

Finally I opened diplomatic negotiations.

I said, "Hello."

The faces yawned a trifle, grew misty and jagged, then resumed a solid appearance. This I found was due to the impact of physical noises on their nervous systems. Being creatures of an order necessarily "other dimensional," they found it a trifle difficult maintaining what to them was a decent state of appearance.

As soon as the shaking and quaking had stopped and the gargoylish eyes had been popped back into many sockets, a large-headed one goggled fiercely in what was probably intended to be a reassuring smile and said, "Teach us to speak English."

This was the first indication of the peculiar irrelevancy which governed their reactions. Later on it was enough to drive anyone crazy. As a matter of fact it did.

But you *are* speaking English," I remarked, collecting my thoughts as rapidly as possible and pulling my pajamas away from my legs to which they were glued with cold perspiration.

"That's what you think," three cavernous mouths intoned solemnly in unison and three enormous heads bent toward me. "We want to know the rules."

"You mean the ropes," I answered.

"We mean the rules," snapped the first big head.

"That's what *I* mean." I said and picked up a flashlight. The beam didn't affect them at all. But the case flew back suddenly and crashed through the back of the bed.

"Don't get tough!" warned all the heads wiggling and waggling.

I nursed a wrenched wrist and stuck my tongue out at them.

"So help me Joe, I only wanted to see you better. Though why, I don't know. By the standards of this world you make a hippopotamus look like a raging beauty."

They subsided grumbling. The flashlight was returned, badly dented.

WELL, the first few nights were the hardest. I managed to get them past the silly impression that they didn't speak English at the end of the second. By the fourth night I was missing the lost sleep. But I got no reprieve.

They were queer creatures by any standards. At first they were reticent in talking about themselves. What was wanted chiefly was knowledge about other people. From hints they let drop I concluded, finally, that they were certainly not of the tribe of Adam or any branch thereof or doing business at the same stand.

After awhile I stopped feeling sleepy. This was due mainly to the fact that while they read the books they had me bring around from the local libraries, I snatched a couple of thousand winks, interrupted at choice intervals by a twinge as they awakened me by the crude, though simple process of banging the book on my forehead.

What a sight in the odd glow which emanated from all around them! Like a scene out of some Oz book. A row of heads gathered in a semi-circle, beyond the light, pitch blackness and me in bed. Great eyes popping and staring.

Occasionally one or another would laugh and the whole bunch would go reeling off into instability for a few seconds and then come to a standstill like water in a quiet pool.

I stood all this for two weeks. When I ran out of money paying for lending library rentals, they materialized some and gave it to me.

Holy mother! Twenty thousand smackers in good old one dollar bills! And brand new! Laying quietly a few feet beneath their faces I became suddenly suspicious.

"Is it queer?" I asked and crinkled one of the notes between my fingers.

The one with the biggest head looked up from the copy of "Gone With the Wind."

"It shouldn't be," he said nonchalantly. "We got them out of the U.S. Treasury vaults in — what did you call it?—oh, Washington."

I went through the floor.

Piles of books accumulated. Luckily I had my own apartment, so nosy chambermaids never interfered. The only thing that got interfered with was my private life. They monopolized my time, got me to quit my job and alienated my girl. It was awful. When I came home one night with the ring she threw in my face, I looked the mob squarely in their excuses for faces. They were a bit ashamed.

"But why?" I cried, burying my head in my arms.

They gazed at me stonily then.

"It was necessary. It is all in the rules."

I looked up angrily.

"What rules?"

"The underlying rules."

The heads swayed smugly. I picked up a book and threw it at them. It went past the row harmlessly.

"Underlying *what?*" I asked, dropping helplessly back to the bed.

One of them started to talk in Russian. He was quickly slapped down. The biggest of the heads cocked one of its eyes at me.

"Everything," he said. *"Everything."*

From the moment they began giving me money I never wanted for comfort. I even moved out of the apartment to a swankier place uptown. The goblins failed to appear for several days after this and I began to feel that the visitation was over. When I woke suddenly the fourth night, I realized immediately that what I had done was O.K. by them. They proved it by coming back. They looked carelessly at the bookcases.

"You have bought us no new books," said one, wagging a finger at me.

I lit a cigarette and put one arm under my neck.

"I have been moving. I apologize. What do you want?"

"Books." A dozen mouths formed the word.

I became irritated.

"I am grateful for everything you have done," I stated, "Yes, even the bad things, like taking my girl away and making a damn slave out of me. I have always wanted comfort and now I've got it. But couldn't you get your books at the public libraries? They have three and a half million at the 42nd St. branch. Think of it! Books on *every* subject, books covering all the phases of earth life. *Those,*" I pointed disdainfully with my cigarette at the stocks of books in their cases along the walls, "are a drop in a vast bucket."

They looked down at me disapprovingly.

"No," they said. "It is not in the rules."

I WAS happy until they told me why they were going to all the trouble of acquainting themselves with the psychology of earth-men. I blew-up.

"You fools!" I cried, screaming with laughter. "What could you do with the planet? Enslave it? The rich have done that already. Dissect a billion bodies? Go to our hospitals. They do it every day. Dig for diamonds? Shall I make you some?" I roared on: "Perhaps you are hungry for green cheese. Go to the moon. I guarantee it to be fresh and untouched by the hand of man."

A dozen heedless fingers turned over page 242 of Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the West" and twenty-four eyes began reading the top of page 243.

"Come with me," I urged, still rocking with mirth. "Let me take you into the homes of the people of the earth and show you life as they live it. You shall hear the screaming of women in labor, the ticking of the feet of roaches on the bare plaster of walls, the scrape of worn-out shoes on patched carpet, a thin gasp in darkness as love is fulfilled and the crest of the wave breaks on the rocks of poverty. Hover with me over the squares of this teeming metropolis and observe the scurrying lines emerging from nowhere and vanishing in obscurity. Feel with me the texture of the skins of a hundred thousand women of the night, listen for the breath in their whispered words which should be happiness but in reality is sandpaper on scalded tongues. My friends, listen. It is madness to want us, insanity to imagine that you harbor the notion. Preserve your reason. Go home. Go home. Surely the earth is but a footstool to heaven, a mere step on your ladder of success. My friends. . . ."

Calmly the busy fingers turned page 263. They were fast readers.

I shrugged my shoulders, winced at a sudden pain in the small of my back and put out the cigarette by crushing it against the bed spring cross-bar.

I went to sleep.

There was only one direction in which to move — forward. And up I went. First the swankier apartment, then still another and still another. Finally I bought a large residence on Riverside Drive and made it my castle. *Theirs,* too. The stacks of

books grew to overwhelming proportions. They flowed out of the cases onto the floors everywhere. The basement was crammed, the attic door was locked. To have unlocked it would have started an avalanche. The only room in the house relatively free was the bathroom.

I advanced socially, culturally, politically. The goblins were vaguely pleased at my rise in the world. Somewhat amusedly they watched my slow advance from businessman to alderman to mayor to state senator. Their mouths took on crinkles when I related my speeches and told of my great successes in beating down the opposition. The night I was elected to Congress I gave a little party.

They were honest and sentimental. Somehow they understood the reason for the celebration and what lay behind the reason and, in a sense, participated. They engaged in the little fest by keeping decently quiet when I wanted to talk and answering when requested.

IN THE HUGE living room of my house, attired in a rich lounging robe, smoking my pipe which I held in one hand and drinking a Tom Collins which I held with the other, I sat in a deep, comfortable armchair and surveyed the scene. The familiar one. A dozen heads, the apex of a dozen spindly bodies, feet resting lightly on the floor, arms akimbo in most cases, folded in others.

I raised my glass.

"To me," I shouted, "and why not?"

"Why not?" remarked the biggest-headed one tonelessly. "It is all in the rules."

I ignored his redundancy.

"Yes, to me, to me because of my success and to you, my dear ones because you made it possible." I drank deeply and set the glass down. I looked up. A grave smile was upon their countenances.

"Ummmmmmm," I noised. "What's up?"

The group grew mournful. Their glow increased and cast dancing shadows about the room. They elongated and became taller. I felt suddenly a chill blowing through the room.

The tiniest headed one moved forward and stopped a foot away from my outstretched feet.

"We shall do it soon," he said, working his thin jaws up and down almost comically.

"It?"

"The conquest. We shall take you. All of you."

"Oh." My heart sank. "Is there nothing that can be done about it?

"Nothing *you* could do about it."

I smoked my pipe silently for awhile.

"I want you to know that I have enoyed my association with you," I said, looking up and gazing at them sadly.

They all crowded closer.

"So have we," they said mournfully and backed away again.

"And there is nothing that can be done about it?" I asked needlessly. I was aware of their power.

The heads swung back and forth ponderously in the negative.

"When do you plan to begin? How will you do it?"

"Within a week," said the biggest-headed one, "and it will not be pleasant."

"It will be painful?"

"It will be painful, but it will be in the rules."

I left them for a while, went upstairs and fingered my gun. Presently I put it away and shook my head. Then I returned and continued the odd merry-making and finally went to bed and dreamed peacefully.

I had six days to work in, and in three I considered almost a thousand separate plans for circumventing theirs. All were fantastic and impossible. I was clinging to the final silly notion I conjured up, when all of a sudden a practical idea hit me and knocked me utterly sane. Of course!

I got them interested in poker. They were a funny lot as you may have guessed and, suspecting nothing, enjoyed the game. We used real money as stakes, which was somewhat silly because as soon as one of them was cleaned out (which was almost always due to my own cleverness) he would merely materialize a newly printed, freshly wrapped stack of bills and continue playing.

Simultaneously I fed them on Arthurian legend and tales of chivalry until suggestion had strengthened their already strong sense of honor.

The fifth night I began the fatal game.

The game started out very early in the evening and I lost heavily according to plan. The progress of the game left me poorer and poorer. I watched their faces carefully as it went on. Slowly they were becoming enthusiastic, acquiring the instinct of the true poker player which is to continue through dawn and beyond. Their faces became radiant, eagerly each one waited for the next hand to begin. I played them carefully, noting the rise of excitement. When I judged them ready, I reached for the cards.

The fourth goblin to my left opened. He tossed a thousand dollars into the pot. Everyone followed suit except the biggest-headed one and the smallest headed one who were playing together and dropped.

When they finished drawing I gave myself the other two kings I had carefully placed in position in the deck and settled back in my chair. The opener carefully considered his hand and bet. The other joined and I tossed the required money to the center of the table. Presently everyone dropped out of the game except the opener and myself. He bet a sum equivalent to what I had left. I let this pass and then suddenly raised.

"The earth and its people," I said.

"What's that?" They all looked at me with startled glances, noses wagging.

"I said I raise you the earth and its people. I can do this. I I think you will find it in the rules."

The goblins consulted together while I kept my hand carefully.

Finally they turned to me as one.

"We have decided that you are right. It is in the rules," said the tiniest headed one and I heaved a concealed sigh of relief because I was almost dead sure it wasn't.

"But how shall we cover this raise?" continued the other and nodded to the opened.

I raised my eye cagily.

"Twenty billions in gold will do it," I stated flatly and held on to my seat as the cellar rocked under the sudden impact of the arrival of twenty billion dollars' worth of pure gold right out of several national mints and treasuries. I pictured the mess of books lying at the bottom of the terrific weight.

"Ummmmmm," I ummmmed, considering my cards. "Will you see me?"

"I will see you," replied the opener and I laid down my cards.

"Four kings," I said grandly. The world looked good.

"I have four aces," remarked the other nonchalantly and laid his own hand down.

You know what that means.

MASQUERADE

by Kenneth Falconer

A grim tale about a man who was cursed, his wife, and the Presence that had horns and a tail. A story of the terror that dogged one who had seen too much.

A MAN CAN wake one morning to read in his tabloid that his father has been shot fleeing the scene of a bank robbery. In these times there is no guarantee against the unexpected striking one down harder than a thunderbolt and almost as quick. From the vast-spreading matrix of the ordinary there may fly into your face the grotesque, the shocking, ever the horrible.

Why did Leonard die?

Who were the Whelmers, silent partners in the most horrid nightmare that ever rose to walk the streets of New York?

Mac Leonard, who is now compressed into the small confines of a crematory urn, had always seemed to me to be one of the chosen of the Lord. In Columbia University where we both studied he was a shining campus light. I said *both studied*, but that is a misconception. Keeping the profligate's hours that he did, tumbling into bed dead drunk four nights out of the seven, Leonard could not possibly have studied in the ordinary sense.

Revolving the matter carefully I realize that Leonard could not possibly have done anything in the ordinary sense. He was a blinding flash of a man, the hardest liver, the most brilliant scholar, and the coolest head on the blocks-long campus was his. If we had gone to a smaller school he would have stood out like a beacon. He would probably, furthermore, have been thrown out like a bum for his vices and dissipations. As far as I was concerned, of course, they were his business. He drank and went with the Joe College set, but had no illusions about their capacities.

This was, you will remember, in the Flaming Youth era, when skirts were short and gin was aged in the porcelain for about five minutes. Mac drank with them, but he talked with men and the rest of the grinds on the school daily and the Journal of the Columbia Philosophical Society.

It comes back to me like a nightmare that was almost funny — the deadly seriousness of the kids. Mac himself had been almost completely taken in by Mr. James Branch Cabell, who had been fortunate enough to have one of his recent puerilities barred from the mails.

Perhaps the business of the mysterious Whelmers was all my fault, for one day I made it my business to catch Mac on the fly between classes. "Leonard," I yelled, overtaking him.

Looking at me with the glazed eyes of a hangover he said: "Hi. Going in for track, old son of the lamp?" He focussed on the book I was holding out to him. "What's that mouse-colored tome?"

"Take it. I want you to read it. My very own personally-annotated copy of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. It's about time you learned something in college."

"Very truly yours," he said, pocketing it and weaving off down the red brick walk. That, of course, wasn't the last of it. He came around that night — standing up his gin and jazz crowd—to chew the rag about Kant. He had actually read the book in six hours, and assimilated most of the meat.

"It is," he said, "quite a change over from math and science to beat one's brow against a thing like this. Have I been neglecting the eternal verities in my pursuit of hard facts? Speak, O serpent of the thousand diamond scales."

Modestly I assured him that that had been the idea. And what did he think of Kant in the light of his scientific attainments?

"Stinking," said Mac briefly. "But—at least a googolplex advanced above Mr. Cabell. Imbued with that quasi-mystic hogwash I could do nought but agree with the simple-minded laddie that the world is what you make it and that the eternal verity is to get along with one's neighbors. Your friend Kant is all wet, but by no means as wet as that."

With that he wandered away. When I saw him next he had enrolled in several philosophy courses at the same time. In the Philosophical Society we pinned his ears back with ease whenever he tried to enter into debate, but that was only because he didn't quite know how to use the quaint language of the gentle science.

I've been rambling badly. The point that I wanted to bring out was that Mac Leonard was brilliant, as brilliant as they come in the current mortal mold. Also that he was a student of the physical sciences and the only philosophy they have, mathematics.

BY A KIND of miracle I survived the crash of 1929 with a young fortune in gold certificates. The miracle was an uncle who had burned his fingers in the crash

Illustration by Bok

of 1922 and warned me: "When you see the board rooms crowded with people who have no business there — laundrymen, grocers, taxi drivers—then *sell!*" Ignoring the optimistic fictions of Mr. Roger W. Babson, prophet of the stock exchange, now, I belive, candidate for the presidency on the Prohibition Party's ticket, I sold and came out on top. I didn't even trust to the safe deposit vaults the money I had made; it went into the fireproof, burglarproof, earthquakeproof warrens of the Manhattan Storage and Warehouse Corporation. Quick-money imbeciles who had been stuck considered me a traitor not to have lost by the crash. For years I was as good as ostracised by former friends. That was all right with me—I was a scholar and intended to remain one while my capital lasted, which it did.

A man can be a recluse in the middle of New York; that much I found out in ten years of study. It wasn't in any of the books I read; it was what I proved with my own quiet life. And at the end of many years I heard again from Mac Leonard — a scenic postal card marked Uvalde, Mexico. Characteristically laconic, the message was: "—and wife". That and his signature was supposed to be all I wanted to know about him and his fortunes since we had parted at commencement.

Hoping that he would not already be gone—who but a tourist would write on a scenic postal card?—I mailed a long letter giving my own story to date and demanding his.

His answer came very much later, three months or more, from Council Bluffs, Iowa:

"Dear Vulcan, (the nickname is in reference to my slight limp)

"So the plumy anaconda has found his forked tongue after these long years? I should be hurt at your neglect of me—failing to write when a simple matter like not knowing my address stood in your way. You're right —I was on my honeymoon in the vastly overrated country of Mexico. And she is a very nice girl, in a rowdy sort of way.

"I'm still playing with paper boxes and numbers. The chair of mathematics at one of our little high-schools out here is all mine, and very uncomfortable it is. Still, Civil Service is nothing to be sneezed at in these troubled times.

"My life seems to have slipped into a slap-happy routine of examination papers and recitations; the really heart-breaking part is that none of my excessively brilliant students get my jokes. Aside from that all is milk and honey. I live in a bungalow with my wife — seems damned strange to write that down; as though it never really happened!—and we are like a pair of larks in the springtime. Whenever quarrels come I demonstrate by the calculus of symbolic logic that she's wrong and I'm right, and that settles the matter. Theoretically, at least.

"Honestly, old dish towel, I'm *happy* — a truly representative specimen of that rarest work of God, the man who is contented with his lot in life. It may sound idiotic to you, but I hope I never change from what I am. If time stood still this very minute I wouldn't have a kick coming in the world.

Mac"

Other letters followed that; there was an erratic quality to his correspondence that made it completely delightful. I found in my mailbox or resting on my doorstep anything from postal cards to bundles of year-old exams in Geometry One, neatly rated with mean, average and modes. For three years it kept up; at one time we were waging half a dozen chess games simultaneously as well as a discussion of Hegelian dialectics. "One of these days" he kept carelessly promising, he would blow into the city to see me.

Then, abruptly, he did. And it wasn't as an honored guest but as a man fleeting from disgrace. Never a coward, not one now in the nastiest position that any man could face, he sent me a note giving the arrival-time of his bus. And he enclosed a bunch of clippings from the local press.

To say that I was shocked would be putting it mildly. He had been no angel in his college days, but a man grows out of that, especially when he marries. The clippings didn't make it any easier. With an obscene, missish reticence oddly combined with the suggestive vulgarity that is the specialty of the tabloid press, they told the sordid and familiar story of a male teacher in a co-ed school—you know what I mean. It happens.

I MET them at the terminal. He was the picture of a hunted man, eyes sunken and hair lank down his temples. He'd kept his shape; there wasn't a sign of the usual professorial pot-belly. But his mouth was very tight. His nose wrinkled as though he could still smell those headlines. Yes, they were so nasty they actually stank.

He mumbled a brief introduction, and I smiled wildly at his wife in acknowledgment. No self-respecting woman would —

They came to my apartment to get their luggage settled. They were traveling light. He explained, as we all three lit cigarettes, that he had left his bungalow in the hands of an agent, and that when the business died down somebody would buy it furnished and ready for occupancy. "But," he added grimly, "that won't be for a long while."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked, with my damned morbid curiosity.

"You saw the papers. To correct a popular misconception, which our journals tended to foster, she was not fifteen but nineteen. Big and dumb. And despite their hinting, she was the only one. And anybody in the school could have told you that I wasn't her first boyfriend—as it were."

"I'm sorry, Mac. It's a lousy thing to happen. I know how it is—" That peculiar noise was me, making like I was broad-minded. But I still didn't see how anybody in his right mind would do a thing like that. I shot a glance at his wife, and luck would have it that she met my eyes squarely.

With the mid-West twang she said: "I can see that you're wondering what I think about the whole matter." I took a good look at her then, my first. She wasn't a very beautiful woman. Her face was the kind you call intelligent. She had a figure that, with cultivation could be glorious; as it was it was only superb. But I'm easy to please.

"My husband made a fool of himself, that's plain enough. If he learned his lesson as well as he teaches— it's *over*. Am I right, Len?"

"Right," he said dispiritedly.

"I'll make some coffee," I said, rising, beginning to walk across the floor. I felt, the way the lame do, her eyes on my twisted right foot. She had reached the kitchen door before I was well under way.

"Please let me," she said. "You men will want to talk."

"Thanks," I said, wondering angrily if she was going to be sickeningly sweet and sympathetic about my very minor disability. "Go right ahead." I sat down facing Mac. "Not many women would be that understanding," I said.

His answer nearly paralyzed

me. He leaped across the distance between us, his face desperate and contorted, whispering: "We're going to some hotel. I'll come back and see you tonight. Have to explain. You don't know—"

"Coffee!" gaily announced Mrs. Leonard, carrying in the tray.

I rose gallantly, and very much surprised. "How in Heaven's name did you make it so quickly?" I demanded.

"You don't think I made it with that fancy glass thing of yours, do you?" she laughed. "I have more sense than that."

"But you couldn't have had time to boil the water!"

"Silly—there was a pan of water seething. Oh!" Her hand flew to her mouth. "I hope there wasn't salt or anything in it!" I seemed to remember something about water boiling—perhaps I had meant to prepare a hot cloth for my ankle before going to meet the bus.

"And this," she said, pouring, "is Iowa pan coffee the way my grandmother made it in a covered wagon."

I got a mouthful of grounds and swallowed convulsively. "Those pioneers had courage," I said inanely.

WORKING on a learned monograph revealing factors in the sociology of the Bronx that Fordham University had not even touched, I was baffled by what I had written a few months later. It was done in the style peculiar to some textbooks and degree themes; that is, it was no style at all but an attempt to set down without emotion or effect certain facts in their natural order.

That was the effect which Mac's talk with me that night had. He had come about nine o'clock panting from the climb up the stairs and perspiring profusely. He wouldn't take anything to drink but water.

"It was partly drink that got me into trouble in Council Bluffs," he said. "I'm never going to touch it again." He looked up at the indirect light from the ceiling and blinked. "Would you mind —?" he asked inarticulately. "Eyestrain —"

I turned off the big light and lit a table-lamp which spread a bright pool on the console, leaving the rest of the room obscured. "Now shoot," I said. "And I'm not making any promises about anything tonight. Not one way or another."

"Don't worry," he almost snarled. "I'm not after your damned money." As I started up angrily — and God knows I had a right to be angry — he buried his face in his hands. I sank back into my chair inexpressibly shocked to hear him weeping.

"Easy," I muttered. "No need to go on like that, Mac. What would Nicholas Butler say to hear a Columbia man crying?" The ridiculous joke didn't stop him; he sobbed like a child. No; sobbed like a man, from the diaphragm, where it hurts as if your ribs are being torn out one by one.

He looked up, his eyes streaming, and wiped his face. Returning the handkerchief to his breast pocket he said in a very steady voice: "It isn't the dreams that get you; it's when you know you're awake and they keep on coming."

"Yes?" I asked, leaning back. I thought he was delirious.

"Shut up. I'm telling you everything — don't you see? It's your fault anyway — waking me up when I was dreaming James Branch Cabell — showing me the way things happen."

"Go on," I said after a long pause. He didn't seem to hear me, for it was an equally long time before he made a curious choking sound and said:

"I think I have been in Hell for the past few years, old ink-blotter. But I recall a very special chapter of the book. Allow me to describe it. There is, first of all, a large, rocky cavern." He paused again and leaned back, speaking in a very faint, rasping voice, as though he could not bear the sounds of the words he was saying.

"And there is very foolish talk going on. There are people in the cavern who think they are Satanists, or something like it. They have prepared fantastic things — a long table, various dyes and pigments. Very foolish. They are well-dressed people; it is true, as a rule, that the poor are on the side of God.

"One of the foolish, wealthy people is a woman. She finds it necessary to undress and begin to dance as the others clap their hands. Did I mention that there were fires lighting this cavern? She spins close by the fires, one by one, and makes it a point to burn herself badly in various places. Then, as she falls to the floor, another, a man, has reasons for doing, essentially, what she has done. But the man wears a chain about his neck which he does not remove, and from this chain hangs a small medallion. When the man is very badly burned another woman makes a fool of herself in the same manner, and after her a man.

"Would you believe it if I told you that in all twenty-four people willingly subjected themselves to wide-spread first-degree burns? After hours of this folly they sat in a circle, still without their clothes and mumbled gibberish for twenty minutes or more.

"At that point they had conjured up Satan, theoretically. My guess is that they did nothing of the sort. The incarnation of Evil? No! He would not have let them live or praise him. Something they did conjure up. What it was I do not know, but this is what happened.

"There was, first of all, a noticeable diminution of the firelight. Then appeared a definite blue glow at what would be the apex of the cone about whose basal circumference they were sitting. As that glow grew the fires went out. There was definitely a Presence there . . .

"I don't know what to call it. It was not Satan. There prob

ably is no Satan. But there was a Presence, and it had horns and a tail and great, shining teeth and lustful, shining eyes."

I STOOD up from my chair. "That's enough!" I yelled at him.

He looked at me and then, shockingly, suddenly, gave a low chuckle. "Quaint tale, isn't it? What's the matter?"

"You tell me!" I snapped. "What's on your mind?"

"Allow me to get on with the story. I'm afraid I was becoming hypnotized by my own rhetoric. And interrupt if you feel too weak to stand it." I flushed suddenly as I felt his eyes on my twisted foot. Where did the damned slander start that cripples are loose in the head?

"Go on," I growled.

"To be brief, direct and — crude — the women then proceed to caress this creature. And then —!

"There appears a man in that cavern who does not wear a pendant from his neck. He is no demonologist. He is, God knows, not wealthy. He is but a simple mathematician who made the horrid mistake of attempting to tie in his mathematics with occult philosophy."

Another very long pause. "Go on," I said.

"Don't get me wrong," said Mac. "Don't do that. I didn't know what I was doing. If I'd known I would have cut off my hand before I wrote the supersonics equations. But it's so simple. All you need is a scale of tuning forks — then you modify them the right way and you find yourself in the nearest occult vortex. It's so simple! The clue is in several of Madame Blavatsky's Meditations. That old hag didn't know what she was writing, I suppose. You need money, millions, to get into the circle. I was an outsider.

"The Presence vanished, and I was cursed by those people — cursed while I was waking, sleeping, talking, walking, dancing, writing and reading. Then they opened a door and threw me out."

"A *door*?" I asked. "In a cavern?"

He laughed like the closing of a lock. "The rocks," he said, "were papier mache. The cavern was the third floor ballroom of a hotel on 32nd Street."

"And so?" I asked.

"I wired back to Council Bluffs for bus fare. I was back there in two days with a tale of urgent business in New York."

"That's plenty, Leonard. Now you can get the Hell out of my house. Yes, even before you build up to the touch for the rare herbs that'll take the curse off you."

"Sorry," he said, rising. "I tried to let you know. It wasn't a touch. I remembered that you have a cousin, or had, the one you wrote that Bronx monograph on —"

"He's up the river. Dewey got him, with the rest of Murder Incorporated. Did you want a bodyguard against the demons? Or do you want to become a policy banker?"

He had his hat on. From the door he said: "I wanted to have a murder done for me. But now I suppose I'll have to do it myself . . ."

I locked the door and went to bed, fuming like a tea-kettle. I'm from a short-lived clan; we break down early and live in the fear of death. That night I found myself with a hacking cough, which didn't add to my sense of well-being, for my father and sister had died of throat infections. You could accurately say that between Mac's turning out to be a chiseling phoney and my fears that in a week I'd be a dead man, I bordered on distraction. There was a heightening of the sensory powers — *all* the sensory powers. The darkest room was not dark enough for me, and the traffic below jerked me up in bed repressing shrieks of pain. It was as though I had been flayed alive, for the silk bedsheets I use for that very reason were like sacking-cloth — or sandpaper.

How I managed to fall asleep I didn't know. Certainly the quality of my dreams was horrid enough to wake me up screaming.

I GOT disconnected scraps and images from Leonard's story of that night. I saw over again, in the most damnably vivid colors, the lie he had told of the ceremonial in the Hotel. Details he had omitted were plentifully supplied by my subconscious — revolting details. Cripples, I am told, are generally stews of repression and fear.

Quite the most awful part was the Presence turning to me and stating, in a language of snarls and drooling grunts, the following message:

"A curse is no mouthing of words. That worries at a man, but does not kill. A curse is no juggling of hands. That worries at a man, but does not maim. A curse is no thinking of evil. That worries at a man but does not blind, tear, crush, char and slash. A curse is something you can see, hear, feel, hate, and love."

That was not the end of the dream, but it was near. After I — subconsciously doubling for Mac — had been thrown out of that ball room it ended and I awoke. My throat irritation was gone, which was good. That night I did not sleep any more, but read and re-read the clippings Mac had sent me. I wanted to look at his letters, but they were in no kind of order.

I saw the sun rise and made myself a breakfast of bacon and eggs. It was interrupted by a telegram slipped under my door. The yellow slip read: "Please phone me. Not a touch. Mac Leonard." The telegram was because I have no phone; if you want to hear my dulcet voice you have to coerce me into going down to the corner drug store to call you up.

Frankly, I didn't know what to do. I was still mad, half because of his ridiculous story, half because of his continuous rude

staring at my right foot. I long ago passed the point where I allowed people to indulge their curiosity at the cost of much personal anguish to me. I decided that I might as well.

I threw some clothes on and went down to the corner where a tubercular young clerk was dispensing a few early-morning cokes. "Hi," he said. "Nice day." Avoiding his conversational spray I got change and slid into the booth.

A woman's voice answered the phone in their room at a nearby hotel.

"Mrs. Leonard?" I asked. "I got a telegram from Mac — he wanted me to call him."

"He must have gone out," she said. "He wasn't here when I woke up. Must have gone for breakfast — wouldn't wait for me, the barbarian!"

I mumbled some inanity or other, wondering what I ought to do.

"Listen," she said, suddenly urgent. "This is the first chance I've had to talk to you, really. I'm just a dumb woman, so they tell me, but there are some things I want to know. That foot of yours — what's wrong with it?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I snarled. "Since you began it, it was run over sidewise by a car when I was about twenty. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. What do you do for a living?"

The damnable impudence of the woman! I didn't answer; just slammed the receiver down on the hook and stormed out.

Mac was waiting for me in my apartment. The landlady had let him in, she told me as I was going up.

"Now what's this?" I asked, as I found him nervously smoking on the edge of my bed.

"Sorry I broke in," he said. Damn him! His eyes were on my twisted foot again!

"What do you want? I was just talking with your wife."

"You might want to know why I did a damned foolish thing like trying to make a student. It was because my wife wouldn't treat me like a husband. I was nearly crazy. I loved her so." His voice was thin and colorless.

"I don't care about your personal affairs, Mac. Get out of here."

He rose slowly and dangerously, and as he moved towards me I began to realize how big he was and how small I was. He grabbed me by the coat lapels; as he twisted them into a tight knot and lifted me so that my dragging foot cleared the ground he snarled: "You tell me what's wrong with your foot or I'll break your neck!"

"Car ran over it!" I gasped. I was shocked to find out that I was a physical coward; never before had I been subjected to an asault like this. I feared that man with the lunatic gleam in his eyes as I had never feared anything before.

"Car," he growled. "Now how do you make a living? Don't give me that 'retired capitalist' bull you tried in your letters. I've been looking you up and you haven't got a single bank-account anywhere. Where do you get your money from?"

A voice from my door sounded. "Put him down," it said. "He's no friend of mine. Maybe of yours." I fell in a heap and turned to see Leonard's wife. "The Whelmers," she said, "disavowed him."

Mac turned away. "You know that I know!" he gasped, his face quite dead, dirty white. It was absolutely bloodless.

"I saw two of the Whelmers in the street. They know nothing of this." She gestured contemptuously at me. "That foot of his is no mark. Now, Mr. Leonard —" She advanced slowly on him, step by step.

He backed away, to before a window. "Only a few days ago," he gasped, "only a few days ago I put it all together. *I never knew your parents. You are the curse of the Whelmers.* And last night I — we — my God!" His eyes were dilated with terror.

"Last night," said the woman, "you were my husband and I was your wife."

With the beginning of a musical laugh she slumped, and bloated strangely, quietly, a bluish glare shining from her skin.

With the glare came a momentary paralysis of my limbs. I would have run rather than have seen what I had to see. I would have died rather than have seen that Presence that had horns and a tail and great, shining teeth and lustful, shining eyes.

Leonard took his dry dive through the window just a second before I fainted. When I awoke there was nobody at all in the room except myself and the friendly, curious police.

FEAR OF SLEEP

Let dark dream and crimson shadow
Weave strange tapestries, and though
After these unfold shall come
From a distant doom slow drumming;
Guard against this baleful reckoning,
Credit not its eldritch beckoning . . .
I must seal my soul inside me
Soundly, and no house can hide me.
Clutching out with taloned fingers
Nameless, deathless rancor lingers;
Thinly veiled beyond my dreaming,
Inward seeps titanic screaming
Whilst I stop my inward ears . . .
Knowledge maddens he who hears!

— Emil P[illegible]

THE LONG WALL

by Wilfred Owen Morley

It was just a high stone wall in Maine. It was not different from any other save for one queer thing — it had but one side and no matter how you tried, you could not get over it.

MICHAEL rolled down one of the front windows and knocked his pipe speculatively against the frame, sending little chips of faded blue paint flying. "Are you quite sure," he remarked, "that we should have turned left at that sign?"

"Wouldn't swear to it," mumbled Crosby. He sidled the car to a stop. "Let's rest awhile, anyway. Roust out the maps, and we'll take bearings after a sandwich or two."

They emerged onto the tufty grass, shaking off muscle cramps of various sizes and shapes. No breath of air was stirring. Above them the sky was spotted with motionless clouds, minus birds of any kind. No scurrying animal life showed itself on any side. They masticated assorted sandwiches between yawns and let the sunlight drench them as it saw fit.

Crosby shied a pebble across the well-packed road at the high wall gracing its other side. "Quite a thing, eh?" he ventured.

"Yeah." The two examined the edifice at leisure. As far as they could see in either direction it extended, unbroken, unmarked. Ten feet, all of that, it rose, dull and grey, the stone of it well weathered. There were no distinguishing signs, no places where grass, vines or trees eclipsed it. Behind them and far ahead, it ran parallel to the sandy road until the far horizons swallowed it up.

"Must be miles long," Crosby whispered, wondering why he dropped his voice. He paused as if to pick it up again. "When did we hit it?"

"After we made the turn. Some time after. In fact," added Michael slowly, "I don't believe we came upon it until a moment or so before we stopped. I was looking at both sides of the road, and who could miss that? I didn't notice it until just before I asked you about the turn."

Crosby turned and stared at the wall as if expecting the structure to explain itself. "It's odd," he stated. "A wall like this should be marked on the map; it should have some sort of reputation, too, don't you think? Signs saying 'You are now ten miles from the famous Long Wall' and so on.

"Who built it? Why should an immense thing like this be constructed out in the heart of the wilds? This territory doesn't look as if it's ever been settled. Maybe it was cleared once, but I'll bet that's all. We must be at least thirty miles from the nearest town."

"More than that," Michael added. "Have you noticed how quiet it's been since we made that turn?" He strode over to the wall, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Look, Clyde. It seems to be made of just one piece. I can't find any sign of separate stones in it at all."

The other joined him. "*Where* did it start?"

"I don't remember, though I'd say offhand not more than half a mile back. Perhaps less."

Crosby drew out his watch abstractly. "12:30. What say we take a little walk before going on? Half an hour's exercise."

"Good idea. I have a yen to hike around this affair. Look, you start down that way and I'll head on. We'll meet after awhile and then try to figure out how big this thing is."

Crosby ruffled his hair, a far-away look in his eyes. "It may be longer than we think."

"Then say we walk for fifteen minutes, each following it in the opposite direction. At 12:45 we stop, and, if the other isn't in sight, we turn around and come back to the car."

MICHAEL started briskly down the road, whistling thoughtfully between his teeth. There were a lot of things about all this that didn't fit in. First of all it was ten feet in height. Why? Perhaps there was nothing wrong with that — after all, he didn't know what the approved height of a wall might be, yet it did *seem* overtall. Call that point one then, even if it might turn out to be okay. Point two: how was it made? You could not figure out how it had been put together. He ran his hand over it. Yes, it felt like stone. But there was no sign of any breaks in it; no separate stones or mortar; no cavities; no appreciable irregularities. Very well, then. Point two: composition.

What was it that was odd about the top of it, now? He let his eye run along its shelf. Nothing there, nothing at all. Ah, that was it. There was no sign of anything at all behind it. No house, trees, bushes, or vines. Nothing leaning over. When they got back to the car, they must walk away from the wall until they could see what kind of land might be on that

Illustration by Hall

other side. Point three, then, was upkeep. For, obviously, the gardener, or whoever it was, had to keep on his toes to prevent anything, vine or whatnot, from marring the unbroken, clean appearance of the wall. Was there a fourth point? Yes, there was. Life, or rather the absence of it. They hadn't seen a bird or small animal for how long? They hadn't been annoyed by insects of any kind during lunch. And Maine, in this time of the year, was swarming with insects of all varieties. No swamp-draining of any kind was likely to prevail here. Of course, the fact that they didn't seem to be near water of any kind might account for the lack of mosquitoes. But there should have been flies, ants, grasshoppers, beetles, daddy-long-legs, and all manner of just bugs.

He stopped to look around bewilderedly. Nothing but grass. A large expanse of open field lay to the right of him, blending finally into wooded hills near the horizon; to the left of him, the wall.

He lit a cigarette and strode on, crumpling the empty package, tossing it against the base of the wall. At length he saw something up ahead, on the other side of the road. As he approached, he made out the outlines of a car, parked over to one side.

His fifteen minutes were up, he noticed, as he flipped the butt away. Well, why not go the rest of the way to that car, see if the occupants knew anything more about the wall than he did. Perhaps they, too, were puzzled. Crosby was nowhere in sight, so the wall must certainly be longer than they expected. Some day, he thought, they must come back and make a thorough tour of it.

His aplomb burst into shreds when he saw, upon coming closer, that it was their own roadster. How in hell could he possibly have gone around the wall, made a complete circuit? Dammit, he had been walking straight, straight ahead and there had been no sharp turns or slow curves. He was positive of that. Yet, here was their car, up ahead of him when it should have been behind. And there, by Jove, was Crosby, coming up from behind him with an equally amazed expression on his face.

"Where did *you* come from?" demanded Crosby.

Michael's stare was incredulous. "What happened?"

"I hoofed it for fifteen minutes, then started back. And all of a sudden, I see you up ahead of me. One instant there was nothing at all in front of me except the car. The next,I see you between me and the car."

Michael gaped at him in si-

lence for an instant, then turned, making a gesture with his hand. "Come on. We'll both try it. Get your watch out and keep your eye on it. What's the time now?"

"12:50 to the tick."

"Good. We'll see if this happens again, and if it does, exactly how long it takes."

They strode on in silence, Michael taking out his pipe and stuffing it as they did so. One must not try to think this out now; one must observe. Observe carefully, meticulously. Would it happen again?

The stillness about the place began to crawl under his skin, yet he didn't want to break it. There was nothing to be said at a time like this. He shuffled along the sandy road meditatively, started looking carefully at the base of the wall. Ah, there it was.

"Keep an extra careful eye out now," he whispered. "If it's going to happen again, it will happen now — or rather, soon. What's the time?"

"It was just 1:03 when we passed the empty cigarette package."

Michael's eyes were fixed up ahead. There was nothing but empty road, reaching up to the rim of vision, and the expanse of field to the right. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing —

There!

"Time!" he gasped. "What's the time?"

"1:08 exactly."

He grasped Crosby's arm as they both halted. "Look up there."

Almost at the horizon was a dark speck over to the right of the road. And — what else was it? Why, the horizon was near. An average person can see a good many miles on a clear day, particularly on an almost-flat terrain like this. Yet, he knew from past experience that their car, for that is what the speck was, was not more than a quarter-mile away.

THAD WING struck a match on his shoe and applied it to the oversized bowl of his corncob, surveying the two travelers as he did so. "What," he asked, "did ye do when ye found that ye couldn't walk *around* the wall, Mr. — Mr. — excuse me, I didn't rightly ketch yer last name."

"Michael," he grinned. "I'm Gerry Michael and this is Clyde Crosby."

"Oh yes, pleased ter meetcher, Mr. Michael. And you, Mr. Crosby, would ye be any relative of that feller who sings?"

Crosby chuckled. "None at all."

Wing nodded pleasantly. "Good thing," he commented. "Them crooners is all right so long as they remain a small tribe. But as I wuz sayin', what did you fellers do when ye found ye couldn't git *around* that wall?"

"Next thing we did was to see if we could find out what was on the other side. We walked back into the field over by the side of the wall until we could see over it."

"And what did ye see?"

Michael looked downcast. "Nothing. That is, nothing worth the effort. It was just an open field, running into wooded hills. Exactly like the side we were standing on.

"We both felt disappointed, and I think we would have gone on if it hadn't been for something that happened accidently." He turned to Crosby. "Suppose you tell him, Clyde."

"It wasn't much of anything," said Crosby. "I slipped on something and went down on my knees. When I got up, I looked to see what it was, and found a little colored rubber ball. The colors had pretty well faded, but there was a definite design to it. Well, I picked it up and threw it away, the way anyone would. I watched it and I distinctly saw it go *over* the wall. Just about cleared it so that it should have fallen just a little bit on the other side.

"But when we got back to the car, my eye caught something across the road. I went over to it and picked it up. It was a rubber ball. *The same rubber ball I had just seen go over the long wall.*"

"I might add," put in Michael, "that I was watching the wall all the time as we walked back toward our car. If anything had come back over that wall, I would have seen it."

"That," continued Crosby, "was just the start. I picked up the ball again, and just tossed it over the wall. You saw me do that, didn't you Gerry?"

Michael nodded.

"So I turned around, ready to get in the car, and *there was that ball on the wrong side of the wall again.*"

Crosby drank a glass of water hastily. "I was about to throw it with all my strength, this time, but Gerry stopped me. He suggested we take one of the paper plates we'd used for lunch and skim that over, then look for it on this side. Just to make sure, we marked it in blue pencil. I told Gerry to do it this time, so he hefted it over, and we both saw it sail neatly over the wall and out of sight. Then we turned around and started looking for it.

"We found it in less than 30 seconds.

"That made us both feel pretty sore. Either something pretty horrible was going on, or our senses were deceiving us, or someone was playing a joke on us. We decided to go over the wall ourselves. I'm smaller than Gerry, so I climbed up on his shoulders and pulled myself on to the top of the wall. I stood there for a moment, looking in all directions. It looked just the same over there, except that, of course, there was no car parked by the opposite side of the road — in fact, there was no road on the other side of the wall.

"I balanced myself right, then made a jump, landing very nicely. And the first thing I saw when I straightened up was *our car.* A second later, Gerry was telling me I'd jumped over on the

wrong side."

"Excuse me if I interrupt, Clyde," broke in Michael, at this point. "I was watching Crosby from the ground. He stood there, looking around him, as he said, and his back was to me as he prepared himself and jumped. I clearly saw *him* over the wall. Yet, an instant later, I turned around, and there he was behind me. And I didn't hear any impact of his landing."

"I did," said Crosby.

"We tried it once or twice more," continued Michael, "then finally we quit. Partly because we were disgusted, and partly because we were beginning to be scared. It frightened me and I'm not ashamed to admit it."

WING KNOCKED the ashes out of his pipe. "I'll tell ye," he said slowly, "what I can about that there wall, and it ain't very much now. That wall has been there fer as long as I can remember, and as long as my father can remember, and it was there when his father came and settled the land here. This ain't a very old town, mister. I calculate it began to be settled not moren a few years before my grandfather came here, after the War of the Rebellion. We all come from Connecticut, but that's beside the point. Anyway, you can see that the wall's been there fer at least a hundred years, and maybe lots more because they ain't nobody who knows anything about it before around the 1840's or late 30's when they first cleared the land in these parts.

"I recall that my father told me about it and grandfather told him. 'Theys lots of things, son,' he said to me, 'which may seem peculiar to you, but so long as they ain't hurtin you, don't you bother about them. Just leave 'em alone.' And that's the way all of us around here look at that wall. It's there and that's all there is to it. Ain't never hurt anyone yet and it don't look as if it ever will unless some fool goes and bashes his head into it, and then it wouldn't be the wall's fault. People don't come on it very often, and when they do, most of the time they don't notice anything wrong with it, except that maybe they'll be sort of curious as to what it's doin' way out here.

"So I ain't tryin to tell you what you ought to do, Mr. Michael and Mr. Crosby, but since ye asked me about it, I say ferget about it and leave it alone. Theys lots of things to fight against that are hurtin' people and ye don't need to find somethin inoffensive like a wall."

"Has anyone ever tried to do anything about it?" asked Crosby.

"No one, 'ceptin' Ben Gaylen. He was the son of old Jim Gaylen — well, it's no use t'go into that because you, bein' strangers wouldn't know Jim Gaylen from Adam. He always was a bookish sort of lad — this was before my time — and he was determined to find out all about that there wall. He didn't. He went mad. I seen him onct myself, in the asylum, and it made me sick. So I'm repeatin', ye'll do well to ferget about that wall."

"WILL," began Crosby, "if I didn't know you better, I'd call you a damn liar. Are you positive you couldn't see the wall once you got off the ground?"

Bentley nodded. "There's no two ways about it, Clyde. That wall's the damndest thing I ever came across. I fly over this way pretty regularly, and I thought there was something wrong when you called me up and told me about it. You couldn't help but notice a wall like that after awhile.

"But the fact is — and it's just about as easy to believe as what you found from experimenting — that you can't see that wall from a plane. And I've flown pretty low over this part at times. You saw how low I was a few minutes ago."

Michael nodded. "Did you get the pictures?"

"Sure did. We'll have them developed right off the bat."

"Well," said Michael, "I guess we're ready. Got the flags, Clyde?"

Crosby nodded. "Okay then. We'll go up and you set those three flags in a triangle. As soon as I spot them with the binoculars, we'll get into position, then I'll jump. You'll see whether or not I come down *behind* the wall."

Crosby fixed his helmet, climbed in, and waved. The autogyro sputtered a moment, then eased up gracefully as he watched. Quickly Michael set the three large red flags in a triangle and waited.

There wasn't any wind this day, so it shouldn't be too difficult to make the jump right. It would be annoying if Crosby landed on the nearer side of the wall — but then, they'd merely try again. Well, they had all day; they'd make it or know the reason why.

He fixed his glasses on the autogyro. Ah, they were about ready, he thought. Bentley was hovering. There! There went Crosby twisting and tumbling with a grin on his face as usual. For an instant he saw only a hurtling black speck, then a great white mushroom sprouted out of it and the abrupt fall was halted.

Slowly, almost agonizingly slow, Crosby came down. It was clear, now that he would land behind the wall. There could be no doubt of that. And, if he couldn't get over, Will could always land behind the wall and fly him out.

Michael cheered wildly as he saw the drifting shape float down on the other side of the wall out of sight, saw the white web of the parachute slowly hauled down. Then, with a sudden stab of premonition, he turned around — and clutched at the nearest flag for support.

Crosby was behind him.

"WE'VE FOUND," summed up Michael, "through careful experimentation, that we cannot go *around* the wall — you go for a certain distance then you find yourself, abruptly, back where you started; we cannot go *over* the wall — you jump over, and parachute down, and you find yourself on this same side, even though an observer can clearly see you go over. So, we're going to try to go *through* the wall."

"That seems to clarify matters well enough," commented Bentley.

"What about the pictures?"

Bentley made a wry face. "Not one came out."

"Why not try," suggested Crosby, "digging a hole under it and coming out the other side?"

"I was going to suggest that," remarked Bentley. "That's why I brought along these long handled spades. A wall like that shouldn't have a very deep foundation. Not so deep that you couldn't easily tunnel under it. Want to try it first?"

The others nodded. "I've no desire," put in Michael, "to mar this thing with blasts if I can possibly satisfy my curiosity any other way."

The three picked up their tools and fell to. The ground, once broken was not difficult for digging and in about three quarters of an hour they had a good sized pit extending far under the wall. Bentley, who was in the lead, yelled suddenly.

"Hey, I've broken through. C'mere and look."

The others gathered about him. There could be no doubt about it. They had broken into a tunnel similar to the one they were digging. A tiny patch of darkness lay ahead, beyond which a shaft of light could be seen. Eagerly they pressed forward, climbed up the other opening.

Bentley began to laugh hysterically. For a moment, they stood unbelieving, then realization struck them. They were back where they started; their car waited on the other side of the road.

"I'M ALL right now," insisted Bentley. "It just seemed so damned funny when I came out of the hole and saw it."

"So now?" asked Crosby.

"We blast."

"Do you think it will do any good? Suppose we do blow a hole right through the damned wall? Won't we find, when we go through it, that we're right back here?"

"We blast," said Michael quietly.

He nodded to Bentley who picked up a drill and held it firm while Crosby smote it heavily and accurately with the hammer. The reaction, they noted was no more or less than what one would expect from ordinary fence stone. They took turns in holding the drill and swinging the hammers.

"Okay," said Bentley quietly. "We're ready to blast."

The others watched in silence as he prepared the dynamite and set the fuses. Then the three of them ran to a safe distance.

The explosion was neither more nor less than they expected.

"Reactions perfectly normal," stated Michael. He led the three over to the wall. A large section of it had been blown out, leaving a deep cavity. Fragments of stone were on all sides and several large chunks they dragged out and threw aside. The wall now had a mark upon it, a hole of particularly dark darkness.

Crosby poked a spade handle into it. "It's awfully deep," he ventured.

"Got a flashlight?" asked Michael.

"In the car."

He returned after a moment, bearing a rope. "This doesn't make sense," he admitted, "but then neither does anything else about the wall, so I'm not taking chances. Three pulls on this rope will mean I want you to help me back."

Silently he fastened the rope around his waist, turned on the flashlight and crawled into the hole. The others stared after him, trying to comprehend the peculiar blackness and apparent depth of the cavity. Numbly they watched the rope play its way out, then came the three warning tugs. They started pulling until at last the familiar form of Michael came into sight.

Yes, it was Michael. Only something in him had died and they knew he would be like that for the rest of his days. When he spoke, it was in a sort of hushed whisper, and they didn't have to be told twice to start picking up the chunks of rock and shoving them in the cavity.

THE NEXT DAY they came back with cement and made a finished job of sealing it.

The only thing he would tell them was that he dropped the flashlight and it went out, *but the light kept on going.* He could see the shaft of light from the extinguished flash drifting slowly away into the unending blackness, a shaft of it etched against utter black.

Somehow, they knew he was not telling all, that he would never tell all.

Michael can be seen these days and you'll find him normal enough if you can overlook a few eccentricities and you aren't too sensitive. By the latter, is meant — well, it's hard to explain. You either get it when you see him or you don't. But you must never turn out a light in his presence, and it is best to speak in reasonably loud, clear tones. He is likely to start screaming if you whisper.

And sometimes he awakes in a cold sweat, gasping about a shaft of light *drifting* away into utter blackness, *drifting* away from its source: an extinguished handlamp.

And somewhere in Maine stands a long, high wall, marred only by a single spot where, as can be seen, someone tried to break through . . .

THE UNFINISHED CITY

by Martin Pearson

A fantasy of perfection and imperfection. A tale of a quaint city in the jungle and the curious fate that overtook a very clever thief who came there.

Illustration by Bok

THERE ARE two ways to enter Oo. One is by way of the Zoon, that narrow, deep river that runs through all the jungle continent of Ild-Chundarath and carries the craft from all the little nations and cities and unnumbered tribes that have their domain along its heavily overgrown banks. It is by way of Zoon that nearly everyone comes to the city, that the little moon-sailed vessels of Gul and Tindorion and Luul come floating down the turgid

waters from inland mountains and come to rest at half-sunken, moss-covered wharves that stand on rotting logs sunk in the muddy bottom. Some unload here their cargoes of rare spices or strange fruits from the interior; others, perhaps, put in only for the night, for none desire to sail along the river in the starless darkness of the Evening Star, wherein abound dangers not to be described.

The sailors do not mind putting in at Oo, that wondrously strange city, the like of which is not to be found elsewhere. They like its smiling, fat little people with their chubby faces and ever readiness to burst out into peals of hearty laughter. They like the quaint hearty laughter. They like the quaint little shops and the narrow winding streets and, best of all that which tickles their fancy, the queer towers and objects made in Oo.

All this lies along the waterfront. There is the heart of the city, there lies the soul of Oo, towards the river it turns its face. But it is in the back of the city that the second entrance lies. In those semi-deserted stretches the high dank jungle presses against the ancient crumbling walls and long green vines hang down from the branches outthrust over the wall and push their way along the streets, seeking the cracks and devices with which to entrench themselves and slowly, with the passing of centuries, to tear apart the pavements and buildings.

That was how Woth of Druun came to Oo. He came through the jungle path and went through the little door. And none saw him because nobody comes through that way and few dwell near there.

WOTH WAS a tall thin man clad in the skin-tight somber garments of his native land. Typical of Druun were his ways, for which reason he had not cared to be seen by too many. For the people of Druun believe in Swish, the God of Darkness. And Swish teaches that all things belong to any who have the ability to take them. For, according to his ideas, those who can make off with what is another's successfully must be wise and clever and skilled in silent cunning. And perhaps Swish may be right. Who are we to tell?

Woth traversed rapidly the back part of the town and soon entered the wider, better kept and more frequented streets where the life of the little city lies. And as he passed into these parts and went among the populace and the inhabitants, his manner changed. He lost his furtive quiet airs and assumed a peaceful unhurried stroll and a gay smile. He nodded here and there to make people think he had many acquaintances and he joined in the laughter of the shopkeepers and sailors. But as he walked his eyes and hands were busy. He took in, in his easy glance, all the little details and hints of the homes and shops around him that make the difference between the expert and the bungler. He never hesitated to assist passersby in their little troubles. He helped the little old ladies in their quaint robes to carry their bundles. He assisted the funny plump shopkeepers to make sales to the gullible river men, never hesitating to assure them that the purchase was very excellent. He would be there when anyone should slip on the pavements and would always graciously help the person to his or her feet. And by and by the long deep pockets of his clothes began to become very bulky and heavy. For Woth was always repaid for his kindness, even if involuntarily.

But mostly his attention was on the town about him. For Oo is a most unusual city the like of which might never be seen again on the face of any of the globes of the sun. Not for nothing is it called the Unfinished City. For it is indeed unfinished. Every tower and every structure is incomplete. Each of the many stone towers that top every house of any importance ends in that half-complete chamber on top. Exactly as if the builders had suddenly been called away and never got time to come back and finish. And every wall and house has a corner or a section that is not complete. In everything there was some imperfection. In the clothes of the people there are parts that seem unfinished. In the tables and three legged chairs there is some part that is not polished or colored or carved and that makes it imperfect. Even the very names of the people drawl off into hints of something left unsaid. If you go into a shop and buy something you will find it incomplete. For the things that are made in Oo are never perfect.

WOTH BECAME most amazed at this constant imperfection and somewhat annoyed, for he was a connoisseur and it pained him to see these things with imperfections that marred their value. He sat himself down before a little dispenser of liquid refreshments, and, as he quaffed his not entirely filled goblet (for which he had not paid the entire amount), he spoke to the smiling keeper.

"Tell me, oh man of Oo, why is it that nothing here is perfect in your most respected city? It finds me most astonished."

The dispenser of liquid goods looked at him with blank incredulity. "Surely from what far off land do you come, oh man of dark garments, that you know not of us? I thought that none did not know of Oo and its God."

"Indeed, oh most honorable man, my land is so far off that you would not know its name," lied Woth glibly. "But, tell me, why is nothing here perfect?"

The shop-keeper answered sonorously as if repeating something he had learned by heart. "Nothing is perfect save Noom. And Noom is the God of Oo. None but Noom can make anything perfect. We who are only his children and his servants can

not make anything truly complete. Were we to try, it would be only folly, for truly no man can make a thing so perfect as to pass the inspection of the All-Seeing Eye. And so to show our great respect and reverence for our God, we do not attempt it."

The man from Druun pondered this a minute. Then he voiced his thoughts.

"That is a most wonderful belief, oh man of Oo. I would fain see Noom, who alone is perfect. Can you direct me to his temple?"

The smiling native nodded and pointed out the way. He bade him go and see for himself the greatness and perfection of Noom. Woth bowed to him and passed away through the crowd to the place indicated. Down the crooked street of the wine merchants, he passed, and into the narrow way of the fur workers. Fnally he entered a great square.

IN the center of the square stood a huge building. It was highly decorated and elaborately carved. Edges of gold and great diamonds which are quite common along the Zoon ornamented the white domed structure and made it truly beautiful. The four scarlet towers each ending in a fused mass of gold as if the tops had been burned by a bolt from the clouds made a remarkable fitting for it.

Woth crossed the square and went to the open doorway. As he entered through the carved golden archway his eyes caught for a moment those of a little man clad in a flowing purple robe squatting at one side of the entrance. The little man was fat and old and his eyes twinkled merrily as he looked into those of Woth. But Woth gave him scarce a glance as he passed inside.

There was a semi-darkness in the interior. He saw, lined all along the wall of the great circular chamber, hundreds of little statues each facing the center and each was an unfinished model of the great statue in the center.

The figure of Noom was carved out of a single colossal block of bluish white stone. It was a figure of a semi-manlike creature, squat, very bulky, and fat. On its broad face, resting on the bulky body, with no sign of a neck between was an expression of amusement. A grin split the features and the eyes almost twinkled as one looked at them.

It was truly perfect. After seeing the incompleteness of the outside city, one could almost believe in Noom's divinity. For every single bit of the great body was carved with a minuteness and perfection that defied detection. No matter how close you got to the image you would find it perfectly carved. Every pore and every, almost microscopic mark to be found on a living creature was there. Almost would one think that Noom was indeed alive.

But that was not what caught the eye of the thin visitor. What he noticed was the necklace that hung around Noom's neck. It was composed of hundreds of little miniatures of Noom carved out of innumerable rare and valuable stones. One in particular caught the experienced eye of Woth. That was a figure about an inch long carved out of a single flawless lynquar gem. Woth almost collapsed when he saw it. The lynquar, rarest stone in all Vesper. The beautiful gem that glowed with its varicolored inward eternal light that was unlike anything else in the universe. He saw instantly that it was worth a kingdom if he could secure it. Woth glanced around.

There was none about. Nobody was in sight. Woth could detect no secret peep-holes that might indicate an unseen watcher. And if Woth could not see any, there were none to be seen. Quickly he reached out a hand, snapped the chain that held the valuable bauble on its central band. Bringing his hand down in almost the same motion, he dropped the gorgeous jewel into a little hidden pocket made for such things.

Woth turned and strolled unconcernedly out. Although he was intensely excited, he showed not one sign of it. Leaving the temple, he advanced across the square and soon was lost to sight in the crowded streets.

But the little fat man crouched at the entrance smiled strangely and glanced inside with his curiously sharp eyes. He dropped back to his seat on the pavement with an enigmatic nod, and a soft chuckle.

Woth passed through the inhabited part of the city in the same easy manner he had arrived. But he made no stops or offered aid. He soon reached the back section where the great jungle slowly creeps its way in. He threaded his way stealthily now, for he did not want to be seen on that part of his trip. As he passed through the wall, he glanced once more at the topless towers of Oo and then carefully shut the wooden door behind him.

Through the steaming jungle he passed, swiftly threading his way through the hanging vines and thick boles of the strange fern-like trees. He travelled swiftly and silently over the thick carpet of fallen ferns. In a few hours it was dark. The pitchy blackness of a Vesperian night was upon him. In the sky, no star showed, no planet nor moon sent its rays to pierce the black. For the cloud belts hang eternal over the Evening Star and never clear.

High in the bole of a tree, Woth lay sound asleep. He feared not the darkness, for those who worship Swish are under his protection and are never harmed at night. And so he slept.

It was day again. What fearsome things had occured at night about him, Woth did not know or care. What terrible voices of lost souls might have muttered about his tree, did not interest him. Swiftly he made a meal of bat meat and fruit, and went on through the jungle paths towards his native city hidden deep in the unknown interior of Ild

Chundarath many days away.

TWO DAYS HAD passed. He was far from Oo and far from any known land. Woth was hurrying swiftly along an animal trail under the shade of the great trees. He came to a part that crossed an open stretch upon which the hot light of the clouds flowed uninterruptedly. As he was about to step out into the open, he saw something move in the green on the other side of the space. Accustomed to the natural inhabitants of the fernforests, he recognized instantly the presence of man. Woth dodged back.

Nothing showed itself on the other side. He waited. Now his ears caught a sound. He looked behind him. There was someone coming along his trail. He watched hidden. In a few minutes, he saw three men come into view. Short and plump they were, dressed in queer robes such as were worn in only one place. And all three were smiling. Woth cast a glance at the other side of the clearing Sure enough, three other men had stepped out. Also short and plump and smiling broadly.

Woth stared aghast. They must have followed him all the way and trapped him neatly. They could easily have passed him, he saw, since they could use the river and streams and take advantage of the few inhabitants. Woth swore strange weird oaths under his breath.

The men began to advance to where he lay hidden. Woth took out the tiny miniature of Noom made of the priceless glowing lynquar, and giving it a last look, placed it in his mouth. He leered through the foliage at his pursuers, and then, with a violent effort, swallowed the gem.

He proceeded to step out onto the path in plain view. He looked at the newcomers and removing his skull cap made a sweeping bow.

The six men from Oo looked at him and seemed to smile even more broadly. Woth smiled back at them and queried in a friendly manner.

"Ah, good men, what do you want of me? Is there anything I can do for you?"

The little men smiled even more than before, if that were possible, and one said pleasantly.

"We were searching for a little ornament that has disappeared from Noom the perfect. Do you know ought of it?"

The man from Druun returned his smile and said blandly:

"Would that I could help you, sirs, but alas I cannot. I have not seen it."

The leader answered: "We shall have to continue our search then. May we come along with you, for we are not experienced jungle travellers?"

"Most certainly" answered Woth not in the least perturbed. "I should be delighted to have you with me."

They took up their journey together. The little men were very jolly and Woth was eternally jesting with them and asking about their God. He thought of an amusing notion and asked them.

"If it is true that none but Noom can do anything perfectly, then how could you ever find the one who made off with that which you seek? For would that not be bringing your quest to a perfect conclusion, which would be blasphemous?"

The little men laughed queerly and replied,

"Oh, *we* will never complete our search. But Noom will. The Perfect God will exact his own punishment and deliver the evildoer into our hand."

Woth smiled to himself and thought of how easy it would be to do away with these foolish men in the night. He wished it were dark already so that he might do it and go to sleep. For he felt very weary and his legs dragged heavily.

In a few hours he was feeling exhausted and dull. The gem seemed to lie on his stomach and grow and grow. His joints were becoming unusually stiff and painful.

When night came, he was able to stagger to a rest, and fell asleep instantly, deciding to put off his task till the morrow.

The next day he felt even queerer. He had little inclination to keep on, and felt decidedly heavier and stiffer. His head was very dizzy and sunk into his shoulders. The stone in his insides seemed to be stifling him. He felt himself visibly shrinking. The little men about him never seemed to take notice of his strange illness but always their smiles grew broader.

Towards mid-day Woth was unable to continue. He lay down in the soft underbrush and the little fat men stood around and stared at him. Woth saw their grins grow and spread, and then finally, as a sickly coldness came over him, noticed them laugh outright.

BEFORE THE temple of Noom in the city of Oo on the banks of the River Zoon sits a man. He is small and fat and he watches with his strange smile the people going in and out of the Temple of the Perfect One. And sometimes when he sees somebody that is tall and thin, he laughs to himself and glances, still chuckling, to a place inside the temple.

There along the wall, one among many others, stands a small stone statue. It is an effigy of Noom carved out of a single priceless lynquar gem. It is as large as an ordinary man and quite an excellent representation of the squat god of Oo. But like all things in that city, it, too, is unfinished. For where there should be twinkling stone eyes, there gleam forth two black human orbs that stare with an unearthly horror out at the scene before it. And if you place your ear to the hard stone sides you may hear a dull thumping as if of a heart beating eternally in the interior.

COLLECTIONS of weird stories are well-known and appear fairly often from book publishers. Ghost stories are the rule in these collections and the modern type of story is rare. The average weird anthology contains the tried-and-true old timers, Poe, deMaupassant, Bierce, and others of the Nineteenth Century. Such books as do contain modern fantasy seek it among the "accepted" writers — the book writers who dabble in fantasy once in a while accompanied by the ohs and ahs of their select little groups of literateurs. When such a man turns out a weird yarn, he exhibits it as a charming little freak, a grotesque to be held up by the tail and exclaimed at by admiring circles of well-mannered literary clubs. And someday to appear in a select volume of weird stories, nestling between Poe and others.

The writer who writes weird fiction because that is his main interest in life and the type of fiction he esteems above anything else, rarely gets a tumble. The pulp magazines are his field, in them he sets forth his masterpieces of imaginative concepts, in their pages and among their readers he reaps his reward. His stories are read by audiences of hundreds of thousands, his name is known wherever people of an imaginative turn of mind reside. But the books know him not. For the elite publishers of book anthologies and the doubly elite compilers of such anthologies, appearance in pulp magazine selling to the great anonymous American public constitutes little of interest or worth. Stories published in magazines with newstand circulation, gaudy covers, illustrations(!), and a price on the cover within the reach of anyone's pocket, just couldn't possibly be good. At any rate, they were scarcely worth noting when compiling an anthology of fantasy fiction.

AS FOR science-fiction in book anthologies? Horrors! Never! Even if H. G. Wells did write several books filled with his science short stories and even if those books were great successes, science-fiction is something for book anthologists to avoid. Novels of this type are permissable but not so short story collections. Yet there are millions of Americans who know that science-fiction short stories are not only good reading and enjoyable literature but that very often they can qualify as true literature by their wealth of ideas, visions, thoughts, scenes and brilliance worthy of the very highest traditions of the imaginative short story. But the Literati could never be persuaded of that. Look, they scream in scorn, look at where these stories are published! Magazines on public newsstands! Dreadful! Bright covers — Ghastly! Illustrations — Poor taste! Captions, introductory lines — Incredible! And the titles of these magazines — Shocking! Read such stuff to find good writing? It could not be.

So, while the weird tale once in a while succeeds in crashing the pages of books, science-fiction tales are rigidly excluded.

That is why this writer and many others were very excited when they first heard that a book was being compiled to consist of short stories of every type taken exclusively from the pages of the fantasy magazines. Furthermore, the book would contain science-fiction too—such stories as might properly belong in a book. Happily we thought of the many magnificent tales and writers that might be included. There seemed hosts of them — all the way back to 1926 and from all the magazines — short stories remembered by thousands across many years. Surely such stories would warrant inclusion? We thought of John W. Campbell, David H. Keller, Stanton A. Coblentz, G. Peyton Wertenbaker, Homer Eon Flint, Clare Winger Harris, Don A. Stuart, Charles Cloukey, Ray Cummings, C. L. Moore, Harl

Vincent, Stanley G. Weinbaum, Miles J. Breuer, Clark Ashton Smith, and innumerable others. Surely, we thought, what a mighty array of terrific fiction could be assembled from the files of these writers! What a colossus among books!

But we shall have to wait. That book has yet to be compiled. The elite circle has scored again.

THE BOOK that was published is entitled *"The Other Worlds"* and is edited and prefaced by Phil Stong. It is 466 pages long, it contains twenty-five stories, it sells for $2.50, and is published by Wilferd Funk of New York. It bears the subtitle on the jacket "The best modern stories of free imagination since Dracula and Frankenstein."

The wording of that subtitle was our first hint. Was this another weird anthology ignoring science-fiction? Well, we could make the most of it anyway. But it did not ignore science-fiction though the weird story is in the majority.

We had thought that it would contain only stories from the pages of the fantasy pulps. Mr. Stong, the anthologist, admits that that was his intention. But, he goes on to say, after going through the files of all the fantasy magazines, some 20,000 stories he estimates, he was not able to find enough good stories to fill up his book — hence there are some tales included that appeared in *Westminster Magazine* and *Esquire* and a couple that have never been published before.

Before going on further, let us introduce Mr. Stong. You all must of heard of him we're sure. For, according to the book jacket, he is "the foremost critic of this type of fiction." He is "a recognized authority upon this unique type of fiction." He has been "a devotee and student of weird and fantastic stories for a number of years." He is the author of many books, the best known of which are "State Fair" and "Horses and Americans."

At this point we wish to state that we are familiar with fantasy fiction in every aspect for over fifteen years; we have met and contacted several hundred students, collectors and enthusiasts of fantasy; we have read thousands of articles and letters by fantasy fans and authorities; we never heard of Phil Stong.

Let that pass. Obviously he is recognized among the elite, among the non-pulp writing literati. The book proves that clearly enough.

"THE OTHER WORLDS" is divided into three sections: "Strange Ideas" being stories with ideas never used before, "Fresh Variants" being new twists on old ideas, "Horrors" being just that. We shall take up the third section first.

Here is a compilation of fairly passable but not outstanding weird tales. The best is Henry Kuttner's minor classic, "The Graveyard Rats." The rest are not poor stories but they certainly do not rate reprinting. They were acceptable stories when they appeared but they are not the gems of weird fantasy. Manly Wade Wellman's "School for the Unspeakable" and "Song of the Slaves" are good average ghost stories. This is true also of August Derleth's two stories. Stong felt that Seabury Quinn should be included and deliberately picked a story he describes as among Quinn's worst "The House Where Time Stood Still." Stong states that it is a good example of Quinn's most outstanding flaws. Therefore Stong stuck it in.

In his introduction to this section, Stong dwells a bit on H. P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft's tremendous popularity compelled Stong grudgingly to admit him a place, but he takes revenge by making mockery of him and including one of his most unrepresentative works, "In the Vault." The manner of Stong's handling of Lovecraft left us utterly infuriated, so crudely cynical it was, so tot-

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ally oblivious to the magnificent classics Lovecraft created.

We think we ought to emphasize here and now the entire bias of this book. Mr. Stong has carefully chosen stories to represent what he considers the average rather than the exception. He has not sought for good writing; he has deliberately avoided good writing. His message throughout seems to be that the material in pulp magazines is poor and infantile, more to be apolized for than upheld. To foster this impression, he left the introductory editorial remarks before the opening of stories exactly as they originally appeared, even when in some cases these are meaningless outside of the magazine's clientele. Certainly there can be no motive for that than to emphasize the "lowly" origin of these yarns and to fix that in the reader's mind.

For his second section, Phil Stong draws heavily from the wilder and more elementary type of science-fiction magazine. Here are paraded as examples of outstanding fantasy such stories as "Adam Link's Vengeance" by Eando Binder, "Truth is a Plague" by David Wright O'Brien, "A Comedy of Eras" by Kelvin Kent, "The Man Who Knew All the Answers" by oDnald Bern. These stories have no business in a book and we think the original editors and writers would admit that. They are written for a certain type of reader — a reader catered to by an elementary plot and a deliberately hack written-down style of writing. (Our authority for this opinion is the actual statements of the editor of most of them) They were certainly not intended for the audience that can afford to pay $2.50 for a book.

MR. STONG states that he considers the only criterion of good fantasy the condition that the story should be utterly impossible. Since no fantasy writer can take such an attitude and continue to sell, obviously he is expressing a private opinion which must arrive at the conclusion that since these stories are impossible nonsense, why worry about good writing?

We must mention one really first rate story here: "Alas, All Thinking!" by Harry Bates. Its inclusion is all the more curious insofar as Stong states that he does not consider time-travel of interplanetary themes worth while. This "devotee" considers such stories trash.

The "Strange Ideas" section does not, of course, include the real thought-variants and new twists. Some of the tales do have clever angles but we would not consider them the best examples of really startlingly original thought. Included here is the only Weinbaum story in the book: "The Adaptive Ultimate" by "John Jessel." Every editor and fan knows that John Jessel is Stanley G. Weinbaum; the great authority, of course, does not. Other stories included here are "The Considerate Hosts" by Thorp McClusky, "The House of Ecstacy" by Ralph Milne Farley, "Escape" by Paul Ernst, and "The Pipes of Pan" by Lester del Rey.

We do not mind saying that in general this book makes us feel slightly nauseated. It could have been so great; it is so utterly incapable. The anthologist deliberately turned down virtually all the great weird and science-fiction, to parade a set of mediocre material. The average would be passable for a single issue of a magazine but for permanent book publication, no. Someday the classics of pulp fanatsy will get their due. That day is not yet. The publishers ask $2.50 for this book. You could buy more and better stories for a quarter that price on any newsstand. Better still, a year's subscription to *Stirring Science Stories* will easily be a better investment for fantasy reading pleasure.

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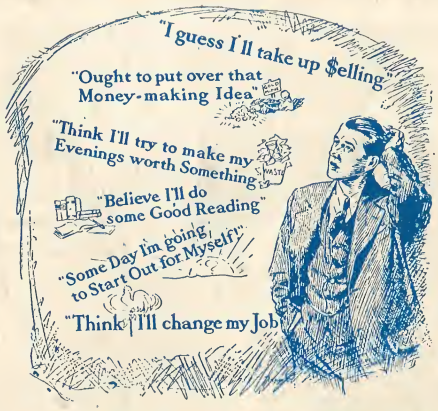

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